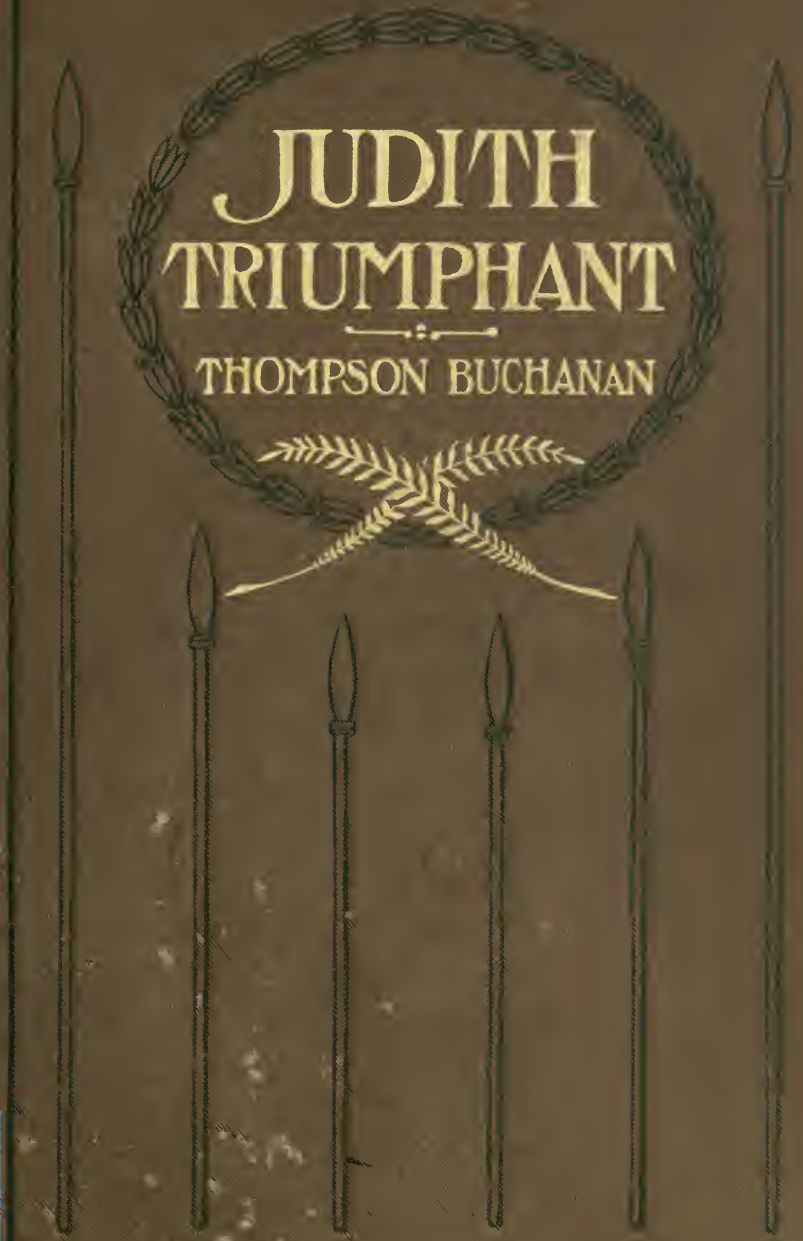
JUDITH TRIUMPHANT

THOMPSON BUCHANAN





THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

923.5

Louisa C. Wade

Judith Triumphant

By

Thompson Buchanan

Author of
"The Castle Comedy"



Harper & Brothers Publishers
New York and London
1905

Copyright, 1905, by HARPER & BROTHERS.

All rights reserved.

Published April, 1905.

Judith Triumphant

PS
3503
B8465j

Judith Triumphant

I

AT the foot of a mountain an army of one hundred and thirty-five thousand men lay encamped, waiting for a few thousand Hebrews to die of thirst and hunger. For Holofernes, war-lord of the Great King, checked in his southwesterly advance on Egypt, had declared that Bethulia must fall. And both besiegers and besieged were too accustomed to the triumph of that King to doubt the issue.

In reality it seemed just a small incident in the great game between Assyria and Egypt, because for centuries Judea had been but as a highway over which invading armies pressed north or south as the balance

3027583

of power shifted between the great Eastern and Western nations. So, no wonder, to the army without the siege was merely a trifle, a pleasant break in the monotony of marching. There would be the rest, long enough, perhaps, for the sore feet of the soldiers, wearied by the seven hundred miles of marching and the months of fighting, to heal. Next would come the forcing of the pass, the scaling of the crags, the breach in the walls, and the blood-feast. Then the army would march on southward, leaving behind a huge pyramid of rotting heads to mark the blasted ruins of a city.

Within, the besieged counted their days of life by the measures of grain in the granaries and the continued volume of the cheery mountain-stream that, bustling down from the heights above, buried itself under the city wall; then, after reappearing once at the great fountain, plunged out again on the other side over the crags to the plain below.

It was the quick eye and the clever brain of Achior, the Ammonite, that fathomed this. On the very first day he had noticed the stream and wondered vaguely. Each

morning and each evening he looked at it letting itself down the cliffs lightly, dropping from rock to rock, and his ideas grew. By the fifth day the size of the stream had plainly diminished. Then Achior shook his head wisely, for he knew that the besieged were filling their reservoirs. If the water he saw came from a never-failing spring within the walls they would not be doing so, for there would be no necessity, the young soldier argued; and forthwith he presented himself before Holofernes to ask for permission to take his Ammonites up the crags.

The burly, bearded Tartan of the Great King turned lazily from the long-lashed, black eyes of sensuous Nin-Gul—"The Destroyer"—to give heed to the young soldier. Nin-Gul looked, too, for few women there were who did not look when Achior, the Ammonite, stood before them. His sleeveless soldier tunic, reaching almost to the knee and gathered at the waist by the broad belt that supported the long straight sword and dagger; the leathern drawers, and the boots laced to the calf, all served excellently

to draw out the line of a figure as remarkable for extreme activity as unusual strength. The hair that the helmet could not all confine was black, while the face, proud, contained, but passionate, was strong enough to win a woman's love and hold a man's respect. Above all, it was known that few men in the whole Assyrian host could stand against Achior, while in the councils even Tharthan of Azotus, Sargan's veteran general, listened when he spoke.

"And thou sayest?" rumbled Holofernes. He had a big voice, and he seemed to lift it from his feet upward.

"That the stream must go into the city from the mountain-side. And, my lord, if thou givest me permission, I will take mine Ammonites around the crags, up the mountain, and find it. Then, it having been turned into another course, the mice of the hills must come out to us or die of thirst, and we shall win without the striking of a blow."

Holofernes exploded a great laugh.

"Do it, and next to Tharthan of Azotus, above all the Princes of Moab, thou shalt stand near me."

As Achior, flushed with that promise, withdrew from the tent, Holofernes turned back to the black eyes of Nin-Gul, who loved him.

Cautiously, but swiftly, the captain of the Ammonites led his five hundred picked men up the rocks. Half-way down the line and in the rear his seconds in command, Rabbath and Arak of Tyrus, kept the climbers going and saw to it that no unnecessary noise was made. The soldiers, trained cragsmen from the Ammon hills, went up the Samarian mountain-side like goats. It seemed almost a flight of shadows on a rocky wall, so little noise they made. Now the shadows reached the top and crouched silent, expectant, in the thickets of the plateau above, awaiting further orders. Achior and his lieutenants drew to the edge of the crags in conference. To the left and far below them lay the sleeping Assyrian army, a host of pygmies huddling in the plain. At certain intervals the faint, glowing remains of cook-fires made out the confines of the camp. The tent of Holofernes, pitched in the very centre on a high

place, stood forth prominently. From it came up the noise of music and singing. A feast was in progress.

Here and there about the camp the tents of other nobles and captains told the places of the various commands. The common soldiers had no tents—nor even sandals, for that matter.

The huge war-engines were great black splotches on the plain, while mere dots moving about them stood for marching sentries. And above, the full harvest-moon reached down low and lovingly over the besieged city.

Silent, grim, defiant, Bethulia hung just on the edge of the cliffs over the only pass that led from the plain of Dothan into the mountains. Ten men on the city wall could roll down rocks enough to check an army. That pass could not be forced, and Achior had found the only way to take the fortress.

Now, carefully hiding from the betraying eye of the reproachful moon, the Ammonites passed on eastward around to the south of the place. In half an hour the noise of running water checked them. The stream

that supplied the great fountain was at hand. In that country of rocks and gullies, the rest was easy. At a place within a mile of the city, where the water whirled around a bend, three hundred men with spades tore a great gash in the earth, and then the stream on which rested the hope of Bethulia, forsaking its old road, rushed off noisily a new way down the pass.

The watchman on that portion of the city's wall above the pass wondered what had happened, until the people came crying, "The fountain hath failed!"

Though dawn had begun to send advance couriers over the mountains, the feast was not yet concluded in the tent of Holofernes when Achior, striding past the winged bulls, entered swiftly. Holofernes, looking up, paused, with his empty drinking-cup held just above the big bowl of the rich wine of Helbon.

"What now, Achior? Are the mice becoming athirst because of thee?"

The harps and the pipes were silent as the young soldier replied:

"If it may please my lord to hear, five hundred stout men now hold the stream. Its waters thunder down the pass. The fountains of Bethulia are gone dry. I have learned the story of the crags and can carry up my lord's soldiers to encompass the town. The mice of the hills are caught safe in their trap."

The impulsive Assyrian thrust his cup into the bowl of wine and brought it up full. "And, by Assur, the God of the Great King," he swore, "I shall do as I have promised!"

The attendant generals and captains of the host stood, silent pictures of expectant astonishment.

"Know you," continued Holofernes, "that from this time forward, for his scaling of the walls of Damascus and what he hath done this night, I hold Achior, captain of the children of Ammon, above all the generals and captains, save only Tharthan of Azotus, and by Nergal, whosoever doth not obey him shall be sent swiftly over the River Datilla into the Kingdom of Allat."

Thus concluding, Holofernes handed his own full cup to the Ammonite.

"Drink ye!" thundered the chief, and every officer gulped at his wine.

But Mesha and Jazen, leaders of the Moabite soldiers, drew off to one side in secret conference, so that they quite forgot to congratulate Achior with the others.

By the next night ten thousand soldiers had gone up Achior's Pass, as the new way came to be known, and the investment of Bethulia was complete.

II



E have sinned with our fathers. We have done unjustly. We have committed iniquity."

The swollen and blackened tongues of the mourners writhed out painfully their lamentations.

"Have Thou mercy on us, because Thou art good; or punish our iniquities by chastening us Thyself, and deliver not them that trust in Thee to a people that know Thee not."

Again the wailing cry, faint and husky, came through cracked lips from the parched throats of the suffering, and ended in the last hoarse appeal—"That they may not say among the Gentiles, 'Where is thy God?'"

Then the people were silent, for they could speak no more. Without water, all throats soon become useless.

It was at the dry and dusty fountain of Bethulia, where the besieged had gathered for prayer. Twenty days had elapsed since Achior climbed the crags and turned the life-giving stream from the city. Still Bethulia, starving but unyielding, thirsty but resolute, hung unconquered above the pass. For Ozias, the ruler of the city, and Enan, the commander of the forces, had made the soldiers, while they were yet strong, pile high huge stones on the city wall above the pass, so that even to the last, though weak as children, they might keep the Assyrians at bay. But up to this time not so much as an arrow had scathed the walls.

Achior the Ammonite was too clever for that. When Holofernes, impatient at the delay which so small a place had caused so great an army, wished to try a storming, Achior turned his mind.

"Why should we fight?" urged the new adviser. "The more we kill the fewer there be remaining to drink the waters in the reservoirs, that must now be running low. Let us rather, if it may please my lord, offer to give them some men to help defend

their walls. So shall we the sooner take the treasure without the shedding of blood."

Tharthan of Azotus agreed with Achior, and Holofernes was fain to be content, feasting with his officers and basking in the smiles of Nin-Gul, who hoped that the siege might go on forever.

Now after a time the wailing of the people at the dusty fountain broke forth afresh. They raged against Ozias, the venerable ruler. Living death-heads tottered close to him to mutter curses in husky whispers. Faint mothers, their mouths swollen and distorted, held up dying infants before him, that, seeing, he might quail. And with one voice the people took up their terrible, monotonous chant of accusation: "God be judge between us and thee, for thou hast done evil against us in that thou wouldst not speak peaceably with the Assyrians. For this cause God hath sold us into their hands. We call to witness this day heaven and earth and the God of our fathers, who taketh vengeance upon us according to our sins, beseeching thee now to deliver the city over to Holofernes, that our end may be short by

the edge of the sword rather than longer and more terrible by thirst."

A huge soldier clad in all the paraphernalia of war pushed roughly through the crowd towards the fountain, storming noisily. His very helmet-plume shook with anger. His harness rattled with indignation. The people shrank away, swept aside like chaff before the whirlwind of his wrath. As he came nearer to Ozias, the venerable ruler seemed at first to collapse within his robes.

"Not a measure of water remaineth in the reservoirs. Wherewith have my soldiers to quench their thirst that they may fight?" roared Enan, for it was he, the commander of the forces.

"Yea, where may the brave soldiers get drink?" piped the people, in weak echo of the big fighter's roar.

Chabris and Charmis, the ancients with Ozias, turned weakly to the easy side.

"We have made a good resistance," murmured Chabris.

"Were it not better, Ozias, that we treat for terms while we are yet strong?" questioned the insinuating voice of Charmis.

"Terms! Terms!" cried the people, with quavering joy, for they felt that with two ancients on their side Ozias must agree.

"The Assyrians fear mightily. Behold, they have not even dared to attack the walls defended by Enan's soldiers." The big man boasted outrageously.

"Yea, doubtless the Great King hath heard of Enan," said Ozias, with gentle sarcasm that utterly failed to penetrate the soldier's armor of self-conceit, and of course completely slipped over the comprehension of the crowd. The people took it seriously.

"Hearken!" exclaimed one. "He saith the Great King hath heard of Enan."

"Who hath not heard of Enan?"

"They know Enan at Dothan."

"He hath marched a day's journey into the plain of Esdraelon."

"And been to Jerusalem since the time of the Passover."

And again the people all together cried, "Oh, Enan must be right! Listen to the wise counsel of Enan, O Ozias."

The big soldier tugged at his beard and swelled so as almost to burst his armor.

Chabris and Charmis, one on either side and a little behind, pulled gently at the robe of Ozias, standing before the fountain.

"Enan hath great influence among the people," whined Chabris.

"The counsel to my mind doth seem most wise," chattered the other frightened ancient.

His two colleagues might as well have hidden their cowardice, so far as its expression affected Ozias. It is true, his tall frame trembled and his snow-white beard jerked curiously with the twitchings of his mouth, but pity, not fear, caused these things. Erect, sorrowful, and totally unafraid he stood, the ancient patriarch looking at his thirst-rebellious flock with eyes misty from unshed tears. He raised his arms, and ancient customs of respect stilled the rebellious murmurs into silence. The people stood with heads bowed, waiting for their ruler to speak. Only Enan, brave in his flashing armor of brass, stood head up, aggressively still.

"My children"—and at those familiar tones, thinned by age, quavering now from

bodily weakness, but alive with loving pity, and throughout resonant of courage, even Enan bowed his head—"my children"—the thin voice scarcely reached over the press, and there was a restless movement as the people pushed closer to listen—"be of good courage. Brethren, God is not dead. Neither hath He forgotten you, my children, here in the midst of your enemies."

The women in the front rank of the crowd began to sob and moan. The men were silent.

"But canst thou give us water, Ozias?" It was the voice of a young husband, a brave soldier, whose wife lay at home in childbirth, moaning from thirst. Then came the cries of the citizens:

"The reservoirs are empty. The moon is clear. No rains are at hand."

Again the ruler stilled the people with his uplifted arms. "All things are possible with God."

The frantic young husband broke in again upon the aged man.

"Thy Rachel would not have died had she had water, Ozias."

A short spasm of terrible pain closed the eyes and contorted the face of the ruler.

"Rachel, my wife, hath gone to her fathers," he murmured. "God be merciful unto me a sinner."

And the people wept with him. Then in the midst of the weeping a soldier came running into the public square from the city wall, seeking Ozias and Enan. The people made way for him fearfully, for his face showed his ill tidings.

"O Ozias and Enan, the Ammonites and the children of Moab of the army of Holofernes have seized the spring without the city wall!"

The ruler and the soldier looked hopeless terror at each other; for this spring had been the last resource in the mind of each. Cleverly hidden by nature in a dense thicket within one hundred yards of the wall, it hitherto had escaped the Assyrians' notice. As though merely desiring a breath of fresh air, the water pushed out from under a stone, formed a big, deep pool in the very heart of the thicket, and disappeared again in the ground within thirty feet of its

original entrance. It had been the custom each night for Enan, with some of the soldiers, to steal forth, carrying skins, and bring back sufficient water to help out during the day. But now, with the reservoirs empty and this scant supply cut off also, the cause of Bethulia was hopeless indeed.

"From the wall we heard them cry out for joy, and then a tall leader of the Ammonites marched his men in between us and the thicket."

The soldier explained it to his chief as the gaping people listened stupidly.

And then, all at once, as they realized the state of affairs, a terrible cry went up: "The Lord hath forsaken us! Let us give ourselves over to the Assyrians."

In vain Ozias raised his arms and cried for peace. The people were mad with fear. Cursing and reviling, they closed about him. The young husband with the wife in childbirth led them, crying, "Better the sword than that our loved ones shall die of thirst."

Chabris and Charmis fled for their lives.

Then the soldier's contempt for the rabble awoke in Enan.

"Peace! Peace!" he roared. "We'll have no more of it," and with sword drawn he placed himself before Ozias. From that moment there was perfect accord between the two.

Now the two leaders stood side by side. Weeping in sorrow for his people, but still undaunted, Ozias raised his hands. "Be of good courage, my brethren, and let us wait these five days for mercy from the Lord. For perhaps He will put a stop to His indignation and give glory to His own name. But if after five days be past there come no aid, we will do the things which you have spoken."

"But who will give our women and our children water and food during those days?" cried the young husband, the now acknowledged leader of the rabble.

And from the roof of a low building to the right of the fountain a woman's voice, clear, sweet, resolute, answered him:

"I will."

III



UDITH!" The cry, combining queenly love, wonder, reverence, rang sharp from Enan's lips. His sword, that but a moment before had been drawn in defence of Ozias, now slipping from the soldier's loosened grasp, clattered on the stones. Whirling, he gazed upward to the right, with arms out-stretched.

Ozias turned also towards the house from the roof of which the voice had spoken. The thick-headed populace, with mouths open, divided looks between the leaders and the woman.

It was a low Hebrew house, in outer appearance not unlike the others, but built of stone and ceiled within with painted cedar, giving an air of added richness and

scrupulous cleanliness that betokened the unusual wealth and taste of the owner. On the low, flat roof was pitched a tent wherein one could rest in the cool of the evening. Beside this tent was the woman.

At first glance she seemed small, but a second look convinced one it was the perfect proportion of each part to the others that made her appear so. Her hair, rippling back from the low, broad forehead that supported it, fell beyond the confines of the fillet, an undulating, enveloping stream of fiery gold, almost to her knees. Her eyes were twin seas, blue-green, unfathomable, in which her light and dark thoughts made the sparkle and the shadows. Her nose was straight and strong. Her mouth spelled love; only about the corners, and quite invisible to the casual gaze, were the firm, fine lines of power. And over all, heightening each beauty, enhancing every allurement, was that mysterious, radiating soul-charm which binds men even unto death.

Thus framed in the circle of the dying sun she stood, a wondrous picture that to Enan, looking upward, seemed as the echo of the

seraphim's song of praise transformed into a woman.

Such was Judith, widow of Manasses, the richest prince of the tribe of Simeon, who died four years before in the barley harvest while yet scarce married. Since that time, avoiding all her particular lovers, Judith had lived alone with a city's affection and the knowledge of her own good deeds for company.

It was the man with the dying wife who finally broke the silence.

"Water, sayest thou, Judith? Where is water?"

And then the people took up the cry. "Yea, Judith, daughter of Merari, where is water?"

The gentle voice of Ozias, now trembling with anxiety, ended it.

"Daughter, as it hath come to pass, our very soul resteth upon thee. Canst thou of a truth relieve the people's sufferings for five days?"

"Yea, Ozias," she answered, "but who art thou that temptest the Lord? Canst thou put a limit upon His mercy and say when or

how He shall do this or that, according to the day of thy pleasure?"

Then as the people shrank abashed, she turned her deep-green eyes, now misty and tender, on the anxious husband. "Thy wife hath been relieved. Even in this past hour my servants carried a vessel of sweet, cool water unto her, and thou hast now a fine son in thy house."

The new father fell on his knees praising God.

Judith slipped a moment into the tent, then came forth again to the edge of the roof, her hands piled high with coins. Standing just above the edge, she threw the money out among the people.

"Take it," she cried, "and in two hours return here each with a vessel to get water, which shall be measured out in fair proportion. For I knew the trickery of the Assyrians, and ere the fountain failed I had me prepared a great cistern and filled it with water. It will last you all five days."

The shout that went up from the people then caused the Ammonite sentries outside the walls to report to Achior that something

of importance must be going forward in the city. And Achior tried vainly to surmise what it might be.

Singing and rejoicing, the people scattered to their homes. Only Ozias and Enan remained beside the fountain, with the woman on the roof above them.

The soldier picked up his sword and thrust it into the scabbard viciously. A man may love a woman with all his soul, but he does not care to see her accomplish something beyond his powers. Enan was plainly vexed.

The good Ozias did not mind his rebuke. He was only rejoiced that the city had been saved for the time. Judith looked down on the two beside the fountain.

"Will you not come up to the roof, both of you? I would speak with you concerning the welfare of Bethulia."

Then the soldier in his clanking brass and the ancient ruler in his snow-white robes passed through the court-yard and came up on the roof.

Judith received them standing. Her first question was rather a demand.

"What is this word, Ozias, by which thou

hast consented to give up the city to the Assyrians if within five days there come no aid to us?"

However, the gentle ruler loved his questioner too well to take offence.

"Naught else can be done, my daughter," he answered. "Scarce one measure of water remains in the reservoirs. The granaries are almost empty. Within a week the soldiers will be unable to man the wall. The Assyrians will triumph without an effort."

"And therefore thou wishest to give us to them the sooner," she retorted, hotly. "Dost thou not know the head-heaps that mark their way? What did Holofernes with the women of Damascus? Thinkest thou he will be more merciful to the fairer ones of Judea? It is not death he giveth them. And a shame it is that I, a widow, should remind thee of it." She paused to sweep with both hands the hair out of her face, that she might the better see two brave men cringe under her scornful eyes.

"But," gently remonstrated Ozias.

"Terms," said Enan; "Holofernes might give terms."

"But—terms!" Her contemptuous laugh made the men the more ashamed.

"Arphaxad in the plain of Ragua got terms, I suppose. The tribesmen in the mountains of Ange got terms. The dwellers in the city of Melothus got terms. The pillaged children of Tharsis and of Ishmael over against the desert on the south of the land of Cellon received consideration. Yea, verily, the heads of the mighty were placed on the top of the pile that their feelings might not be offended by being mixed too rudely with the common people. Yea, Holofernes gave them consideration. The head-heaps were all arranged according to rank." She paused, out of breath and words. The men, too, were silent, beaten beyond the power of speech.

After a moment Judith resumed. But now the fire was gone. Her voice drooped with her figure, her eyes were misty. "And the women, the wives, the mothers, and—and the widows, what of them? Some are in the tents of their enemies, the fortunate are dead. Nay"—with a sudden return to her old fire—"if the men will not fight, give

swords to the women. Let us go forth and cut and slay, and die ere we fall into the hands of the Assyrians."

Burly Enan recovered his manhood at that. "Thou knowest, Judith," he protested, hoarsely, "so long as stone walls and sword and armor hold, just that long will I protect thee."

"I know, Enan," and her voice softened just a trifle; "but why, then, spake thou of terms?"

"But, food and drink," reminded Ozias.

She turned to him, sweetly humble. "Let us then ask the Lord with tears that He show His mercy upon us, for we have not followed the sins of our fathers who forsook their God. And you, brethren, on whom the soul of the people resteth, comfort their hearts by your speech."

"And when the food and drink are gone?" suggested Enan.

But Judith had apparently lost interest. She stood beside the tent looking not at them, but far past them northward towards the camp of the Assyrians. Her eyes were big and blank. Then, suddenly, the watching

men saw something in the depths take form and color. Something it was that brought the blood in hot blushes rushing to her face. Her bosom rose and fell, and with the third breath a mighty resolve had grown—so mighty it drove the blood back on her heart, leaving in her white face lines that never showed there before. Only, her eyes were wild and her mouth, set close, now read just courage. Love was gone. When she spoke it was not in the usual tone of an answer, but in a far-away voice born of her great resolve.

"As you know, what I have spoken is of God. You have said there remain but five days. So be it. You shall stand at the gate this night and I will go out with my maid-servant; now pray ye that, as you have said, the Lord may look down upon his people."

She ceased speaking, but from the rapt face the unseeing eyes still gazed far off to the north.

The soldier fell back aghast.

"Judith!" It was a heart-cry of protesting love.

She turned to him gently: "Search not into what I am doing, but until I bring you word, let nothing be done. Only pray for me to the Lord our God!"

The soldier looked once at that divinely absorbed face, then mutely turned away in unspeakable grief.

But Ozias, the Prince of Judea, said to her: "Go in peace, and the Lord be with thee to take advantage of our enemies."

When the men had gone, the woman sank down in humble supplication to her God.

Later that same evening, just as the people were getting their water from the reservoir of Judith, the city gate opened barely, and, with the sad good-byes of the ruler and the commander of the forces in her ears, a woman, attended but by a helpless maid, stole forth to conquer an army.

IV



AY, child, be not afraid. Nothing can harm thee."

In spite of the whispered assurance, the little maid-servant, sobbing hysterically, drew near enough to touch the robe of her mistress. Every moment the noise of the crying increased.

Judith caught the frightened one sharply by the arm. "Cease! Be still!"

The sobs of Sarah descended into sniffling gasps, then sighs and silence. Trembling, but quiet, she crouched beside her unafraid mistress in the shadow of the city wall. Back of them Bethulia, starving, but, thanks to Judith, defiant still, stood tight-locked against the invader. Before and all about the city the swarming host of the Assyrians hung thirsty for the blood-feast. And here, helpless, alone, in this mist-hid debatable

ground between invaders and invaded, were the two women, one of them the about-to-be freely offered price of her city. The other, the humbler woman, for mere love was following into worse than death.

Now the two began to move along the wall towards the west. They must go slow and cautiously, for Sarah was well laden. Even in the camp of their enemies the women of Judea might not eat unhallowed things, so the maid bore a bottle of wine, oil, parched corn, dry figs, bread, and cheese sufficient to last the two five days. That was all the time the necessities of Bethulia allowed. One woman, for the other could do nothing but suffer, must conquer an army of one hundred and thirty-five thousand men in five days. Nay, even if her hair was of the sun, her eyes of the sea, and her beauty as of the soul transfigured, the task looked impossible. And she went almost unadorned to the work. There was no covering for her head, merely a thin fillet of black to keep the streaming hair from out of her face. No rings or stones distorted her small ears. Around her throat was clasped a broad

collar of pure gold, from which thin chains of exquisite workmanship ran out to golden bracelets on her arms. Anklets and chains of the same material just permitted free walking. Her robe was black, in sorrow for her people, but about her waist a girdle, a serpent, likewise of gold, clutched it so that her every movement revealed what yet was hid. Her eyes were full of shadows, her face showed love, alluring, while against the black robe her arms and bosom, half-revealed, were white as marble and warming like wine.

Such was the woman who with her life's sacrifice ahead of her now stopped a second time to comfort her handmaiden, weaker in courage.

"Nay, come, child, no danger threatens. See, the moon hath gone behind the clouds. The mist covereth the earth, wrapping all in its white mantle."

"But thy black robe, it can be seen," chattered the frightened girl.

"If it would please thee, I'll cover it. Give me the cloak."

Joyfully the girl handed over the long, white cloak that could scarcely be distin-

guished in the fleecy mist which even shrouded the city wall at a little distance.

Now the ground fell away sharply from the wall, so that the women had to keep close indeed to be in its shadow. To leave it was dangerous, for then at any time they might run into an Assyrian sentry, and that was not Judith's plan. Her ideas of sacrifice did not include becoming the plaything of common soldiers or low officers. The tent of Holofernes was her aim, and vaguely she wondered of the Ammonite who had brought the soldiers up the crags and captured the secret spring. She knew an Ammonite had done these things, because the besiegers had tauntingly shouted it to the watchers on the walls. So, along with other plans for vengeance, that Ammonite was included in her thoughts. Her scheme of action was to keep on under the city wall towards the west until she reached the pass which the wall overhung, then she would go down this pass, always under danger from rocks above until she came to the plain. When found down there, she could demand to see Holofernes. It was a plan impossible save for one who fear-

ed not to die. 'Tis true Enan had promised to patrol the walls, but he could not keep watch upon her. Besides, the sentries, who knew not yet of her venture, had been too long warned of danger not to be on the look-out for prowlers.

Before the women had gone two hundred yards, Sarah stumbled against a rock and gasped out a quick cry of pain. As though in answer, instantly something twanged above them. The air fluttered before Judith's face and a quivering arrow pinned her cloak to the ground between her feet. Then the two women lay trembling against the wall until they heard the big voice of Enan roaring above them: "Thou dog, there is nothing there. Do not waste thine arrows at mist-wraiths."

At last they crept forward, but ere the trembling of that first near look on death had ceased, another mist-wraith loomed suddenly up before them. It stopped and they stopped, still all over. The three mist-wraiths regarded one another.

"Thine was a close escape, comrade; I saw it," the strange white figure whispered.

The smallest figure, carrying the burden, was shaking like the palsy, with teeth chattering loud. The middle figure answered in a likewise hoarse whisper, using the vernacular:

"The noise-making captain of the guard was a fool not to see us sooner. We were too bold."

"Have a care, comrade; remember, Achior said this was but to try them as to their watchfulness. And the fifth night, at the dark of the moon he will put the ladders in place even as he did at Damascus."

"Yea, at the dark of the moon," murmured the spokesman of the two figures going westward.

"Hath thy comrade a plague, he shaketh so?" was the next question.

The shaking of the smallest figure increased perceptibly; the chattering teeth doubled time.

"Nay, 'tis the night air, and he is yet young at fighting. That arrow affrighted him."

"These women of the Hebrews, 'tis said they be beautiful. Ah, when the breach is

made"—and the big soldier drew in his breath ecstatically. The other two figures leaned against the wall, and, before comment could be made, the sandal of a sentry scraped along the top above them. The big Assyrian heard it, too. "I go, comrade. Is not 'Damascus' the word?"

"Yea, comrade, 'Damascus,' Achior's word," whispered one of the figures against the wall.

"Yea, Achior, the Ammonite, he of the crags and the spring, he is a leader." And the big soldier was effaced in a bank of mist.

The two figures sank upon the ground. Sarah lay prostrate from terror. Her mistress sat crouching in some strange animal-like posture, muttering between her teeth: "These women of the Hebrews be beautiful."

It was beginning to sweep over her fully what she really must do, and mercifully the shame of it was also beginning to brand itself in her mind so that the anguish of her mental suffering might obliterate all thought of personal danger. For the moment womanly modesty triumphed over her love of country. With a faint cry of inarticulate

soul-pain she sprang up, burning with horrid blushes at her own thoughts. Her eyes, wide with the horror of unspeakable loathing, sought out fearsome pictures of her in the mist. The fantastic mist-wraiths, as though directed by some hand, savagely playful, grouped themselves in forms and shapes and manners, all too plainly appealing to her inflamed imagination. There were tents, and banquet boards, and great bowls of wine, and couches, and monstrous men of fierce demeanor; and, by some trick of fancy, somehow in each picture she seemed to see herself—herself, a plaything, the toy of a lustful fiend's caprice. And shame shook her as a leaf. She shrank back, shutting out with her hands the horrid pictures that confronted her.

"I cannot! I cannot! I cannot do this thing!" It was gasped forth, the revolting cry of a pure woman's soul.

Then suddenly there came to her super-excited senses, as from a great distance, the faint, weak cries of people dying. Gradually, out of confused mingling of swelling sounds, distant tones took definite form. "I thirst."

"Give me to drink." A woman's voice cried, "If Judith had not failed us!" And a multitude of voices, weak but accusing, echoed it, "Yea, she failed us."

The woman shrank as from a blow, but the voices went on, and now she seemed to see those who called. There were gentle Ozias tottering beside the empty cistern, and brave Enan, pitifully thin now, too weak to wear his armor but still supporting his ruler. And all about them were the staggering, perishing people with one voice cursing Judith: "She gave us water but to hold us until the Assyrians' wrath should become the more inflamed. She saved herself and sold us unto our enemies. May her memory be utterly damned!" And then through the babel of sound there came the pitifully small cry of a new-born babe. She knew it, that child whose life her own timely aid had made possible, whose mother she had promised to save — that child, so like the one they had taken four years before from her arms, from under her kisses, to lay away forever. Yea, that child would die, and the people whose lives she had promised to save, they

would die, too. They depended upon her. In fancy she could hear again their ringing cries of joy when the new cistern was opened to them. They had called her "Highest among women!" "Savior of her people!" If she went back she would only have prolonged their lives a sufficient time for this blood-thirsty Achior to lead his men over the walls. She knew the people would be too weakened to resist. Then her tortured mind seemed to see the flames, to hear the clash of the weapons, the shrieks of murdered men and outraged women, each one of whom, dying, screamed, "Thou couldst have saved me, Judith!"

Lastly she saw razed Bethulia and the pyramid of rotting heads.

For a time she died; then gradually a sweet peace soothed her troubled mind. Her hands came down from her face and she smiled; for all the ugly pictures in the mist had gone. Instead, she saw joy and gladness, banners waving, people singing, paths of flowers, and soldiers brave in victory, while, with a mighty blaring of trumpets, her own name was being proclaimed on high.

"Hail, thou, Judith! Most exalted above all women, savior of thy people!"

Then reverently, her lips trembling a little but her eyes brave and steadfast, Judith knelt for her last talk with her Father before she entered utterly into the hands of her enemies.

"O God, Father Almighty, who knowest Thy servant's heart, absolve her body of the sin which it must do."

And rising, she led the way down the pass.

V



T the lower end of the pass into the mountains, Achior, the Ammonite, and Tharthan of Azotus, walked in the moonlight. The mist of the earlier night was gone, and now, as though to make amends, the moon had come out clear and beautiful to wash away with liquid silver all traces of the dirty clouds.

The aged general and the young warrior were deep in personal matters.

"And thou sayest"—suggested Tharthan.

"That I fear Mesha and Jazen may conspire to harm me with my lord Holofernes through Nin-Gul, his concubine."

"Can they?"

"Yea, I have noticed it. 'Tis Jazen's doing. Mesha hateth, but is brave. Lies only come forth from Jazen's mouth. And,

then, he knoweth" — the young soldier paused.

"Doth he know aught to thy hurt?" inquired the old general, solicitously.

Achior, the Ammonite, waited long before he spoke. "Only that my mother was of the Hebrew people, like unto those in the city up there." And he pointed to Bethulia, outlined clear on the heights above. "She was of the tribe of Gad, and my father captured her."

Tharthan of Azotus looked mildly at the moon as he gave his next advice. "Then, my son, 'twere best that thou kill Jazen of Moab at the first opportunity."

Two figures all muffled up in white cloaks came out of the pass that led down from the city. The quick eye of a sentinel caught their unfamiliar gait, and his voice rang out in sharp, stern command: "Stand! Whence come you?"

The figures paused and one spoke, but the sentry under the direct eyes of his officers saw only duty, and would not let them by.

"Come," said Achior, "let us see what night-birds the man hath caught."

The officers came near.

"Women!" exclaimed Tharthan, in amazement at the sentry's explanation, while Achior promptly demanded of the figures:

"Who are you? Harlots of the camp?"

The taller of the figures straightened and threw aside the muffling cloak that enveloped it.

A splendidly beautiful woman, with wondrous hair and robed all in black, stood before him:

"I am Judith, a woman of the Hebrews, who am come unto my lord Holofernes."

A sortie two such warriors, schooled in war alarms, would have met and driven back, but now before such loveliness they stood silent, with eyes and mouths stretched wide, not knowing what to do. Now, a beautiful woman is a self-measuring machine that accurately notes its own effect. Judith saw just what she had done. Languorously she raised her arms to sweep the hair back from her brow. Achior's jaws shut with a snap. He gripped and shook himself as one awaking, and then exclaimed, explosively:

"By Assur, Tharthan, I knew not before that Temmachus and Istar had a child!"

The veteran general also seemed to wake up. "Ah, these women of the Hebrews—"

Achior interrupted quickly.

"Would I had led my soldiers over the walls days ago. Nay, I blame not my father now."

And all the while Judith was standing before them just so that the very best effect of every allurement was shown.

"What art thou doing here?" demanded Achior, at last.

She smiled so as to quicken the steady heart of the young soldier, long in rough camps.

"I am fled from my people, because I knew, despising you, they would fall a prey to you, and would not of their own accord yield themselves that they might find mercy in your sight."

Her voice was as the sad, gentle murmur of running water heard at a distance. Every tone was a caress.

"If the maid speak the truth, she delivereth wisdom," quoth Tharthan of Azotus,

sagely. The aged general had seen Hebrew beauties before, when he led Sargan's armies; besides, age does not kindle quite so quick nor burn so hot as youth.

But Achior spoke to her. "Thou hast saved thy life by coming over to us."

Fully understanding, Judith smiled upon him. "My lord speaks kindly to his servant. Might I know the name of my lord?"

"I am Achior, Captain of the Children of Ammon."

"And right near to my lord, the Prince Holofernes, Tartan of the Great King," ended Tharthan for him. For the shrewd old man had seen his young comrade's enthusiasm and meant to aid him.

"If he can take this beautiful Hebrew woman to himself," argued Tharthan, inwardly, "it would be but fair recompense for what he hath done for Holofernes."

Apparently the sly plan worked well. The woman turned upon the young soldier one of those mysterious, unreadable smiles that women make for men to puzzle over and to long for. But in her heart, behind that

smile, there was real joy, for the plan of vengeance had begun. One of its two main objects was already falling victim to her hair, her eyes, the black robe, and a smile.

The next move was a surprise. She approached the men confidently. "Wilt thou give me to drink?" The look, the words, the tones—soft, caressing—were all for Achior. He stooped and gathered up in his joined palms water out of the stream that issued from the pass—that very stream which he had misdirected about the city.

"Nay, in thy helmet," she said, imperiously, drawing back.

The proudest soldier in all the camp obeyed her humbly. He held the helmet, filled with water, towards her, and, bending over, she barely sipped it. He looked across the metal head-piece into the blue-green depths, then looked away. They seemed to him so shadowy, so mysterious and cold. Now she faced him, gayly triumphant.

"Thou hast given me to drink. I have thy protection. Take me to the tent of Holofernes."

"Yea, by the trick thou hast my protection." Achior spoke coldly. "What wouldst thou more?"

"I have told thee," she answered, with a woman's petulance. "I must see the Prince Holofernes, that I may give unto him the secrets whereby he may take the city without the striking of a blow."

Tharthan uttered a contemptuous laugh. "Women, women, always to the highest," he sneered. "Take her, boy, to the tent of Holofernes. Such an one were not worth thee. The red and the black, this one and Nin-Gul, accord well. Together they make the colored standard of the Assyrian. And whenever thou seest the Assyrian standard, it means fight. A joyous time in the army; yea, a joyous time! But I must leave thee. Farewell until the morrow." He took a step, then paused. "But, youth, thou mightst take her in the morning to the tent of Holofernes, but keep her to-night, thyself." And with this parting advice, the rough old campaigner started off to his resting-place.

Achior turned towards the woman. She

was bent from him, half crouching, loathing in every line of her face, eloquent terror pleading for mercy in every cringing curve of her body. He spoke to her roughly.

"Come; as thou desirest, I will take thee to the tent of the Tartan. Pray to the gods that he be not far in wine." He ended it with a contemptuous sneer, turning to look over the sleeping army towards the little height on which the tent of Holofernes was pitched, and from which now came the sounds of high revelry.

Suddenly a complete change came over the woman. Her womanly intuition recognized the true man beneath the rough outer armor of the soldier. Instinctively her heart knew that in this Achior, the Ammonite, the bravest soldier in the camp of the Assyrians, the embodiment of all most dangerous to her people, she had found one on whom to depend. And her woman's heart fluttered with joyous weakness at the thought. Before she had been cringing away, but now of a sudden she was against him, clinging to him, clutching his arms, and all the while crying, reminding, imploring: "Achior,

thou hast given me to drink, I have thy protection. Thou wilt save me in danger." Then with another swift change, fully self-controlled, ashamed, she drew away from him.

"Pardon thy servant, my lord; she hath only fasted too long and is weak."

The man looked at her, puzzled, but kindly.

"Yea, Judith of the Hebrews, thou hast the word of Achior, for thou art a woman, in appearance and manner like unto none I have seen before. Put on thy cloak again that others may not be blinded in the camp, and I may get thee to where thou wouldst go safely."

Now, the fighting power of each successively great nation has depended upon the pre-eminent development of some one line of offence or defence. The supremacy of later Rome lay in the short sword. Ancient Assyria lived by the bow and arrow. The army of Holofernes could hide behind the flights from their archers. Achior commanded the heavy fighting men who wore armor and helmets and carried shields,

while they fought with spears, long straight swords, or broad dirks. These were the men, trained mountain-climbers, whom he would lead up against the walls under cover of the twanging, whistling rain of death sent over them by the swarm of archers in the rear.

It was towards that part of the camp where these fighters were quartered that Achior led Judith and her maid, the quietly terrified Sarah. They passed through the long lines of the archers lying in huddled heaps upon the ground, according to the various commands. Bare-armed, bare-legged, sandalless, scantily clad men they were, who lived but to shoot. Their keen little eyes, bright and sharp, could tell a distance to the fraction of a foot. Their lean, strong arms could draw the great war-bows with just the right measure of power. Their senses accurately gauged the wind. Beyond this they knew naught—neither fear nor thought of death—only duty.

Such were the men Judith saw lying about her—the sinews and backbone of the Assyrian power. Thousands of them were toughened veterans who had followed Thar-

than of Azotus, with the mighty Sargan, on his Western raids, when he captured seventy-five cities and carried away two hundred thousand prisoners, besides the thousands impaled or put to the sword. And the newer ones were just as good as the old, only, perhaps, more impetuous, more anxious to fight.

But Achior strode on, unmindful of the, to him, accustomed scenes, and Judith hurried after. When weary Sarah staggered under the weight of her load, Achior kicked a man awake and made him carry it.

The archers with their bows and arrows and dirks had been left behind. The great war-engines that sent huge stones crashing against the walls loomed up gaunt and black out of the plain. The cavalry lay encamped, a guard twelve thousand strong, all about them. These were the men who, clinging with knees and calves to the stirrupless saddles upon the war-horses, charged with their long swords when the archers and spearmen had broken the foe.

And at last, past the great camp of the prisoners, they came to the forces of the

children of Ammon. With careful eye Judith had noted as they progressed the fine army of the Assyrians, the trained archers and spearmen from the plains of Mesopotamia; the swordsmen of Urtaki, King of Elam; the horsemen of Syria, the fierce fighters that had crushed Arphaxad and Merodach Baladan, the kings of the East; the soldiers of Gambuli, and, lastly, the men from her own people's hereditary enemies, Metini, King of Ashdod; Padi, King of Ekron; and Zil Baal, King of Gaza. The Moabites also she had seen and feared. Once in the passage a soldier leered at her. Her guard crushed him with the hilt of his own sword. It was but an incident in such a place and they passed on.

Now they were come to the camp of the children of Ammon, the body-guard of the Tartan. The change was evident. The sentries called sharper, the arms were brighter, the men looked bolder. The hand of Achior was everywhere. And Judith began to regard this man more attentively. Not so tall nor so broad as Enan, he yet looked stronger. His voice was likewise lower,

softer; but three of his words, she knew, meant more than all brave Enan's bluster. When the soldier leered at her, Enan would have sworn great oaths. Achior said nothing—just crushed him. His was the strength of nervous force, the quiet of conscious power, and it became him well.

Thus watching and thinking over these things, Judith came to know in her heart that should grave issue arise between them, this man was one to fear. And with her growing secret fear was also gratitude, for she remembered the advice of Tharthan of Azotus, and, blushing at the thought, she considered "he could have held me in his tent, yet because he promised he taketh me to Holofernes when I could not have gone a foot without him."

Musing thus she looked on him with fear and gratitude. And in the soul of a woman the union of fear and gratitude may bring forth—?

The voice of Achior roused Judith.

"Have a care," he said. "The tent of Holofernes is at hand."

VI



N the very centre of the army the tent of Holofernes lay, guarded by nature and his soldiers. A little island of rock, surrounded by sharp supporting breakers, rose abruptly perhaps fifty feet from the grassy plain. Smooth, hard, baby precipices guarded the top, while, drawn about the bottom, lines of sharp rocks waited, points upward, for whatever might fall. But one path, up which from necessity men went in single file, reached the smooth space above. Here, on the top of the little rock island, safe above the plain and secured by faithful guards from all chance of assassination, Holofernes had placed his tent. The space was little more than sufficient for the big tent of the Tartan and a smaller one close at hand for

Nin-Gul, his concubine. It was an ideal location for the leader of such an army.

At the foot of the steep path the man and woman paused. "Leave thy maid-servant here," commanded Achior, and, turning, instructed the guard to keep the frightened Sarah safe.

Half-way to the top the soldier stopped and checked the woman. From the recesses of the hood her big, dark eyes questioned him. He caught her by the arm and put his own face close to hers, as though to read her soul.

"Thou art of exceeding beauty, Judith, but if thou camest hither with aught of evil in thy mind, thou hadst best go hence now. I will help thee if thou wishest, for I have a kindness in my heart for thy race. But"—and his tone sank into deepest meaning—"trust not an Assyrian lover."

From above the sounds of music—lutes and harps skilfully played—a woman's singing, then a man's coarse oath came down as though to punctuate his words.

The eyes of Judith wavered. She turned from Achior to look about her. On all sides

the moon showed the host of the Assyrians sleeping. The gentle noises of a camp at night came up to her. A horse's stamping, the rattle of a spear against a shield, the faint murmur of guards talking near at hand, the muttered curses of some restless soldier, all the varied sounds breaking the night silence settled about her heart with terrifying grip. Then her head lifted still higher, and there, far above the camp, strong, beautiful in the silvering moonlight, was Bethulia. She looked back to Achior. Her eyes, big, soft, almost caressed him.

"Nay, I told thee truth," she said.

Disappointed, he turned and led the way up the path.

"Who goeth there?" The sharp, stern voice bespoke an Ammonite soldier.

"'Tis I, Achior, who would speak with my lord Holofernes."

The guard drew aside quickly for the leader whose soldiers loved him. Draping her cloak about her so as best to conceal all of her face and person, Judith followed Achior quickly into the tent.

A gust of ribald laughter blew against

them entering. The lutes and harps, the taborets and pipes, were going madly. Half reclining on an ivory couch, upon one end of which sat a woman, a man bawled forth an obscene song. Over them a wondrous canopy, woven of cloths, golden, red, black, and purple, studded with emeralds and pearls, made the upper frame of the central picture. The tent was hung in the Assyrian red and black, while in one corner the war standard of Holofernes, showing the king with bow drawn, and the winged bulls, upreared itself proudly. Before the couch was placed the great banquet board laden high with the remains of a feast. Here had been the carcasses of two sheep roasted whole; at the other end was the quarter of an ox. In between were huge piles of bread, figs, dates, and all the fruits of Damascus, while in the very centre stood a great golden bowl of the rich wine of Helbon, flanked on either side by smaller silver bowls of palm and an inferior wine. On benches drawn about the board were the leaders of the forces — Urtaki of Elam, Sangar of Carchemish, the Rab-shakeh or herald of Holofernes; Erioch, King

of the Elicians; Mesha, the Prince of Moab; Kerak of Haresh; Dibon, the Moabite; Zil Baal, King of Gaza, and, above them all, next to Holofernes himself, Tharthan of Azotus, who had just come in. Torches of fragrant wood shed sweet-smelling light over the scene. The whole effect was redolent of barbaric richness.

"What now, Achior?" Holofernes ceased his song to ask the question. He was a big man and bellowed like a bull. Brawny, black-bearded, little-eyed, with fierce, hooked nose and thickened lips, he looked the cruel, sensual leader whose westward course was marked by hills of heads and the bodies of outraged women. And yet he could be both generous and gentle.

"What now, Achior?" he repeated, and the players on the instruments ceased.

Standing before the winged bulls of brass, just within the entrance of the tent, Achior answered:

"If it may please my lord Holofernes, I bring a prisoner, a woman of Bethulia."

Every man in the tent gazed quickly then, but they could see little of interest. The

shrouding cloak covered up Judith well. She stood just back of Achior, and a little to his left, in a line between him and the sentry.

"A woman!" sneered Holofernes. "We desire no women here. Let her be sent back whence she came, that, according to thine own plan, they may all be delivered into our hands the sooner from hunger and thirst."

Nin-Gul on the end of the couch applauded the sentiment heartily.

There was a faint murmur among the gathered leaders.

"If it may please my lord," spoke up Sangar of Carchemish, a privileged one, "give her unto me. There be no woman in my tent. Even though this one be ill-favored as Allat herself, she may come."

"Nay, there be no woman in my tent, either," said Erioch, King of the Elicians.

Urtaki of Elam looked towards the door. "That hath a likely seeming," he said, after profound though distant examination.

"Who would have wench of the virgin Achior's choosing?" sneered Mesha, Prince of Moab. "Since his lawful wife died he hath not looked on woman."

Achior caught himself hard, for that girl-wife had been slain by the Moabites.

"Since Achior's wife was murdered by dogs of Moab, thou meanest, Mesha," broke in Rabbath of the Ammonites, with quick reply.

Dibon of Moab hastened to avert the storm.

"May it not please thee, my lord Holofernes, that the woman unveil, that the rest may laugh at the man who getteth her?"

A whimsical idea caught the fancy of Kerak of Haresh.

"Rather," he cried, "may it not please my lord that we all cast lots for her, and let the man winning, if he hath not a kindness for her on sight, no matter how ugly she may prove, be forced to pay to the others each a forfeit."

Nin-Gul beamed at that, and Holofernes, seeing her approval, signified assent.

While the lots were being prepared by Nin-Gul a chorus of joyous excitement broke forth among the soldiers. Only Achior, standing there in front of Judith beside the brazen bulls, said nothing. Once he turned

and looked at her, and she, who was already beginning to know his face, could now read in it, even through the folds of the muffling cloak, dauntless courage and grim resolution to keep his word.

The lots, smooth plum seeds, one of them black with burnt wood from one of the torches, were rattled in a helmet.

Urtaki drew, and Tharthan, and Sargan, Erioch and Kerak—all white. Then Mesha drew out his hand, and the black seed had gone to Achior's bitterest enemy.

Nin-Gul laughed gayly then, for Mesha loved her and this would rid her of his importunities. "Thou hast the skinny, starved Hebrew, Mesha," she cried, and would have gone on, but the quiet voice of Achior interrupted.

"If it may please thee, my lord Holofernes, this woman hath come here my prisoner, bringing important tidings of the hill-mice, and I"—he ended it impressively—"have given her my protection unto thee."

Holofernes was not disturbed.

"Yea, verily, Achior," he said. "Thou hast as always well performed thy duty even

unto the full of it. Thou hast delivered the prisoner unto me and I have given her unto Mesha."

"She shall not be Mesha's!" Achior spoke in the grim, rugged tone of determined strength. For a space not a soldier in the tent moved. They stayed absolutely still, watching with fascinated gaze the black beard of Holofernes that seemed to grow blacker against the steadily increasing white anger in his face.

"She shall not be Mesha's?" He almost hissed the words. "Then she shall die, and thou, too, braggart Achior."

The hand of the great Tartan went to the head of his couch, and with incredible speed his javelin was launched at Judith. But the hand and eye of Achior were just as quick. His long dirk was out. A spring, a wide sweep to the left, and the flying javelin, struck sidewise, deflected to the left. Judith was saved by a foot. The point of the Tartan's weapon rang loud on one of the brazen bulls, having passed clean through the body of the sentry. The soldier fell, and died writhing, an impaled worm. No one

paid any attention; only, a few minutes later, Jazen of Moab, entering hastily, slipped in the blood, and in a fit of petulance kicked the body clean out of the tent.

"Uncover thyself," Achior spoke low to Judith before another move could be made.

The right arm of Holofernes that had cast the javelin was yet extended across the banquet board. The others were still gazing affrighted at Achior's boldness when Judith, with one swift motion of free grace, threw aside her cloak, and all the beauty that had bewildered Achior stood revealed.

The arm of Holofernes fell crashing on the banquet board. His body sank back heavily upon the couch.

"May Assur pardon me! But for brave Achior, I had killed," gasped the Tartan of the Great King.

"And should such an one be for a conquered Moabite, my lord?" questioned Achior. "A daughter of Istar and Temmachus should mate only with a great fighting man."

"A daughter?" murmured Holofernes. "Nay, 'tis Istar's self."

His face, where the beard permitted it

to show, had turned from white to crimson. His little eyes, as he sat there, became red like fire. His very beard was twitching with desire.

"Whence come ye? Approach," he said, and at the same time motioned for his officers to drag aside the banquet board. When it was out of the way, Judith, coming near, knelt down before him. But Holofernes would not have it so.

"Raise her," he said, and every man tried to help. "Nay, such an one should kiss naught but a soldier's sword," and he held forward the hilt of his own, in sign of his pleasure. Then he spoke to her. "Be of good comfort, and fear not in thy heart to tell me for what cause thou hast left thy people and why it hath pleased thee to come to us."

"Perhaps that might best be told to only thee, my lord," suggested Achior.

"Yea, verily; even as always, Achior, thou speakest wisdom. And for what thou hast done this night thou shalt be raised to the command of half mine army."

Then the mind of the leader reverted to

Mesha and the lots. He saw an easy way of settling two difficulties. "And Mesha—well, Mesha should have some woman. He shall take Nin-Gul."

Judith looked across at Achior, and what she saw in his face made her speak forth suddenly, imperiously.

"Thou hadst best not give up Nin-Gul, my lord Holofernes. Thou hast not me—yet. Nor wilt thou have me nor yet Bethulia unless for a short space I go as I will, do as pleaseth me, and live as I wish."

A soldier, he loved bravery, and the answer pleased Holofernes.

"It shall be as thou desirest," he declared, "only, Nin-Gul goeth to Mesha, for having seen thee I can think of no other woman."

An hour later, below the tent of Holofernes, under the edge of the baby cliff, Achior with Tharthan of Azotus walked in friendship. For Tharthan was counselling his young comrade, because the old soldier knew full well that honors and a sore heart ofttimes go twin. And above them, at the entrance of that tent which had been the abode of Nin-Gul, Judith stood gazing at

Bethulia, now gradually fading in the dying moonlight; while far away up there on the city wall, a weak, aged man and a strong young warrior sadly watched the lights on the little hill below them grow dim.

VII



N the tent of Mesha, the Prince of Moab, Jazen and Nin-Gul conspired together. And Achior was the acknowledged object. It was a plot within a plot, for Nin-Gul, the erstwhile dancing-girl, whose beauty and brains had once raised her to the post of first favorite, was far too clever to make known her real object. Instead, large, languorous, voluptuous, she lay back among the rich robes of the couch in her carefully rehearsed posture of abandon, and with her big black eyes—those eyes that varied directly with their owner's interests—gazed lovingly up to Mesha, who sat beside her. Little Jazen was pacing the tent excitedly.

Already Mesha believed that Ea the Wise had sent the Hebrew woman in answer to the prayers of Nin-Gul, because that per-

fection of sensual grace and beauty loved not the great Tartan, but himself, the under prince.

Mesha hated Achior with the straightforward hatred of an hereditary enemy bound for the time by a resistless power to fight beside his foe. Jazen hated him, too, with the sneaking, venomous rage of the snake, because Jazen had been the instigator and secret leader of that raid into the Ammon hills which five years before had deprived Achior of father, mother, young wife, and home. A man hates most him he has wronged most; so Jazen's feeling was bitter indeed, and active.

Last was Nin-Gul's hate. The combined venom of the other two came not to the quarter of the ex-favorite's animosity; for had not Achior brought Judith unto Holofernes?

And so, tight-bound in a common cause of wrong, they plotted.

"And thou dost hate him?" questioned Mesha, anxiously.

"Hate him!" The eyes of Nin-Gul flashed real anger. "Nay, I do not; 'tis past the power of hate!"

She sat up on the couch in her excitement, her muscles twitching, her fingers writhing in and out past one another. "If I but had his head as a plaything, to pluck out the scornful eyes, to drag forth the contemptuous tongue, to scratch it, to kick it— Oh!" She fell back among the robes again, livid from the quick, glaring Eastern rage.

"He surely must have done unto thee some great wrong," suggested little Jazen, stopping in his walk to regard her slyly.

"Wrong?" repeated heavier-witted Mesha after him, thoughtfully. "Wrong?"

Nin-Gul saw her mistake. Instantly she reached up until her gliding arms encircled the neck of Mesha. "Ah, my lord," she sighed, lovingly, and drew his head down until their lips met and clung together.

Jazen laughed quietly, turning away to do it.

Now, behind him over on the couch, cuddled safe in her arms, breathing in the mind-reeking perfume of her hair, held fast by the languorous invitation of her eyes, Mesha listened to the low-voiced explanation: "Nay, my dear lord, it was in the

days before that my senses had been swept away by the sight of thee — even before that time my lord Holofernes had smiled upon, then forced me. I was but a dancing-girl, poor, though of good birth in Damascus, my lord, when this Achior violated, then struck and scorned me. Nay, my sweet lord, do not, I pray unto thee"—she struggled to kiss, to hold him. Then as he broke away from her arms, wild with rage against Achior, the woman turned over and hid her face in the robes of the couch, her whole frame shaking violently. Laughter and tears look much the same from the shoulders.

Jazen stopped Mesha at the entrance of the tent as he was setting out with his sword to kill Achior. The shrewd little trickster had not for a moment been deceived. He knew the true story of Nin-Gul, that she loved Holofernes.

"But I will go!" cried Mesha, trying to shake off all restraint.

"Nay," protested Jazen. "Thou wilt but spoil everything. Rather let us wait and plan so that he die not by the sword quickly, but slow in some horrible manner."

"But I will cut him in pieces!" roared Mesha.

"He is now among his Ammonites, and they will feed thee to the dogs in small pieces ere thou canst come near him. Then"—he ended it slyly—"thou couldst not be gathered up in the arms of Nin-Gul so fondly."

Mesha listened to reason then.

"Let us plan," he said.

They came back into the tent and all three sat upon the couch.

"He must be hurt sorely in the eyes of my lord Holofernes," said Nin-Gul, decisively.

"And how may that be done?" questioned Mesha, blankly.

"Oh, it may be possible," quoth Jazen, to draw out Nin-Gul.

"But Holofernes hath given over to him the command of half the forces for that Achior hath brought the Hebrew woman unto him for a mistress," said Mesha.

"Yea, and yet thou hatest him, and so doth Nin-Gul hate him, although through his bringing in of the Hebrew woman you both enjoy your perfect love."

The little man turned his usual sly, mean glance on Nin-Gul as he finished, then shook his head gravely as though pondering deep on the problem of human nature.

"Yea, thou hast delivered a true saying, Jazen." Mesha spoke wonderingly, gazing straight ahead of him.

The woman moved uneasily, lowering her lids to hide the slow venom mounting in her eyes. She spoke slowly, corroborating Mesha. "That is so."

Jazen permitted himself to become blandly logical.

"It would seem unto me, then, that this Achior, having done to you both so much good, should rather be held in high esteem by you than so cruelly hated. Had he not brought the Hebrew woman, Mesha, thou hadst not enjoyed Nin-Gul, and thou, Nin-Gul, wouldst not have been perfect in the love of Mesha, but wouldst rather have been miserable, the poor slave of the cruel Tartan, my lord Holofernes." He ended it in tones that mingled moving pity for the poor slave and great joy at her fortunate escape.

The woman writhed visibly. Her hard black eyes looked murder at him. She hissed rather than spoke—"And why, then, Jazen, dost thou hate this perfect Achior?"

It was a totally unexpected question. The worm had turned. Mesha laughed, explosively.

"Ay," she went on, in tones of intensely suppressed passion, "why dost thou hate him? Dost thou think that I do not know?"

"I—I—" stammered Jazen.

She swept on, rage-bound, unnoticing the interruption.

"Wouldst thou have me tell unto Achior the story of the three heads on the pole—the father's on top, the mother's below, the young woman's in the middle, as was seemly, after she had repulsed thee?"

Jazen fell on the ground, rolling and twisting in loathsome terror. All his diplomacy was fear-fled.

"Nay, nay, 'tis not so; during the night Mesha told thee." He crawled over and tried to clasp her feet. She drew out of his way, sneering: "Yea, where there is such perfect love there should be no secrets."

"Yea, verily," spoke forth Mesha, in all honesty of heart.

Being a woman, Nin-Gul changed suddenly. "Stand upon thy legs, Jazen," she commanded.

At the voice, Jazen stumbled up and stood trembling with hung head and eyes pitifully beseeching.

"We need each other, thou and I, Jazen, therefore I shall not tell this thing which I have learned unto Achior; rather together, Mesha, thou, and I shall kill him. But thou art like unto the fox, Jazen, and, therefore, I tell thee that shouldst thou by so much as the breadth of one hair vary from the matter of fair dealing with me, then I shall bring it about so that Achior knows, even though I hate him. And that would leave me to kill him myself. And for cause of hatred, we hate him for that he hath brought dishonor upon our lord Holofernes. For through Achior a foreign woman by the power of an evil spirit hath caught our lord by the eyes and holds him even though she will not deliver herself unto him — which is a great dishonor to

our lord Holofernes and the Assyrian host."

In spite of his extreme terror, Jazen had to cough to keep from smiling. Mesha was listening, eyes and mouth open. The others would plan, but he knew that in case of real danger, he, the slow-witted, would be called upon to execute.

The voice of Nin-Gul, now quietly authoritative, took up again the line of plan.

"It must come to pass that we shall find evidence of communion between Achior and this Hebrew woman whom Holofernes would take unto himself. Then Holofernes will certainly kill Achior, or thou and Mesha may slay him, declaring what you have discovered."

"So that Holofernes in a rage may also kill the Hebrew woman," murmured the sly Jazen, but much too low for Mesha to hear.

"Now," concluded Nin-Gul, "I go unto Holofernes to poison his mind against Achior and the Hebrew."

When she had gone, Jazen went out and walked a long time by himself, for he knew now the task before him. He must kill Achior first, and Nin-Gul then by all means.

"If it may please my lord Holofernes to listen to the voice of his handmaiden who lies prostrate under his feet, she would speak with him."

The tones of Nin-Gul wavered; her hands trembled; she was hot and cold. For this was the man whom, with all the fierce ardor of her Eastern nature, she really loved. She loved him for his brutal courage, his wild temper, his fierce passion, for his very unfaithfulness; and, lastly, she loved him most because she feared him most of all the men she had ever known.

"Rise, Nin-Gul," Holofernes spoke kindly. "Come," and he held his sceptre towards her to kiss. Then he made a place on the couch beside him, but Nin-Gul preferred to crouch on a cushion at his feet.

"Speak," commanded Holofernes.

"Nay, my lord," Nin-Gul's voice now was low and humble. "'Tis not that thy maid-servant should dare to advise thee, but only because thou didst once have a kindness for her, and she loving thee, loving thee beyond her health of body, is very grateful."

The good impulses of Holofernes were

touched. Nin-Gul had been true and loving, and he regretted somewhat having given her to Mesha so summarily.

"Speak forth freely, Nin-Gul, what thou hast to tell, and fear naught."

"The Hebrew woman—" the defeated one spoke low.

"Ay!" It was a fierce exclamation from Holofernes. His great Assyrian nose became more hooked, his black eyes smaller, beadier. Nin-Gul saw the interest with an aching heart.

"She is very beautiful, and Achior, who brought her to thee, is very good to look upon in a woman's eyes."

"And Nin-Gul is very jealous." Holofernes ended it for her, brutally.

"Nay, nay, lord, I could not help that, loving thee so, but"—her voice took on sudden excitement—"if I should bring my lord proof—"

"If any man should grow so bold as to dare to interfere between me and aught I have set apart for mine, then that man dies right speedily."

And Nin-Gul stole from the tent satisfied, for she thought that with Achior the protector gone, the rest would be easy.

VIII



T the foot of the crags below Bethulia, Judith stood gazing up at the city she had left to save. It was the evening of their first day in camp, and in accordance with the permission of Holofernes, the women had come out to the mountain-stream that they might pray and purify themselves after the manner of their people. Now her devotions having been concluded, Judith was taking her last near look at home for that day, ere she returned to the treacherous toil of watching and dissimulation on the little hill in the centre of the camp.

The tropical night dropped with its usual startling suddenness, and the big white moon, as though caught unawares, was hurrying up from the west to paint Bethulia with fleecy silver. The city wall looked

white and stern and cold—the outward semblance of the living death within, Judith thought, and shivered at the idea. She wondered what they were doing in the city. It was about time that they had finished for that day the distributing of water from the reservoir she had prepared, so the people must be for the time reasonably content. Then consideration for her people led to anxiety about her particular friends. There were Ozias, the undaunted guardian of his people, and brave Enan, who now would stand by him faithfully. These two were her chief concern, her aiders and abettors in the desperate game to save the city. It was a game that called for all their powers of nerve and brain, and, what was far greater, for the almost divine courage of infinite faith. Already her part, even with the excitement to keep it up, was beginning to tell on Judith; but if hers was hard, she thought, equally trying at least must be the lot of her confederates, with nothing to do but wait, and, waiting, to keep up the courage of the people while the water crawled steadily down the sides of the cistern and death

walked even more boldly in the city. Next came the thought, suppose she should spend herself in vain and not be able at the last to avert that death from all her people. The mere idea was so horrible that she shuddered all over.

"Art thou cold, Judith, or hath a palsy taken thee? Thou shakest so." It was the voice of Achior that brought her back abruptly from her dreams to the active realization of the desperate part she must play. He had come up quietly from behind, with his noiseless soldier tread, to surprise her.

"Nay," she said, honestly enough; "'twas but a thought of the city then that frightened me." As she spoke, involuntarily her deep eyes looked him over approvingly. From laced boot to helmet, he was as a woman who loved a soldier might wish.

"And what was that thought?" he asked.

"I was thinking of those of my people up there within the wall, suffering and about to die." In spite of herself, her voice rang with such true feeling that Achior looked keenly at her.

"I thought thou didst give them up of thine own accord," he suggested, mildly.

"Yea, they had sinned in that they were not mindful of the power of the Lord, but trusted rather unto their own force. That having failed, then they were about to eat of the consecrated food and drink of the blood of the ewe lambs appointed for sacrifice unto the Lord. Wherefore I left them, that I might be not utterly confounded in their iniquities."

"But now, having come away, wouldst thou like again to be back with them, Judith?" He put the question quite simply.

"Wherefore askest thou that?" Alarm was in her tones, for she feared the strange young soldier, who seemed almost to read her thoughts.

"Thy face, just now, it told much—much more than thou wouldst desire it to tell."

The woman laughed gayly. "Nay, Achior, thou shouldst have known 'twas but a sorry feeling brought upon me by the sympathetic moon. Though, of a surety, I do sorrow for them truly."

"That is so," quoth Achior.

The woman went on hastily in full explanation, woman fashion, putting it all on the man. "Would it not bring upon thee a grief to leave thy people, thy family, and thy kindred to sure death and save thyself, even though they had sinned?"

"Yea," said Achior, "I left my people once, father, mother, wife, and when I returned, enemies whom I knew not had slain them all." He turned away, his face setting hard in the lines of controlled grief and anger at the memory of it.

Judith put her hand timidly on his arm. "Yea, then, of a truth thou canst understand my recent suffering. I have left my people, and when I see them again they will be impaled or headless corpses."

"And thy husband," said Achior. "For from thine appearance, thy form, and thy manner of speech, thou hast been married. Thou art no virgin maid."

"I am a widow," said Judith, simply, her eyes darkening.

"Nay, forgive me, I meant not to press rudely upon a fresh grief." Achior's voice

showed a strange mingling of feelings. It was tender, sympathetic, yet glad.

"Mine husband, Manasses, hath been dead now four years in the barley harvest. Maids of Judea marry young, yet since I have not known lovers," Judith concluded.

"Indeed?" And now the voice of Achior was all glad.

Judith was too much a woman not to read his thoughts clearly and, in her heart, joyfully. Yet the voice of duty tugged hard, whispering, "This is thine enemy, Judith, thy people's most dangerous enemy. Use him so as later to revenge thyself upon him." And heeding both her heart and her duty, the woman answered: "From that time such a man hath not loved me as I would give myself unto."

"And, therefore, thou art come unto Holofernes, the Tartan of the Great King," Achior punctuated, bitterly.

"Perhaps 'twere better to come early and get that place than be brought later and not fare so well," she taunted, meaningly.

The soldier sneered at her. "Thou for-

gettest that thou wouldst have had that lesser honor had I desired it," he said, brutally.

Judith cringed, every sense outraged at the lash, for she knew well that what he said was absolutely true. His respect for his merely thoughtless act of protection, the giving of water to a helpless woman, had kept her safe from him. And she knew, also, that she might trick or escape from the bold, hot-blooded Holofernes, but should Achior really desire her, he would have her in spite of all she might do. Yet, realizing all this, her heart made her strive to stand high in his regard. And she comforted her mind with the thought that she was doing it from a sense of duty.

"And thou thinkest I came but to give myself unto Holofernes, to remove Nin-Gul from her place of high esteem?"

It was a demand put imploringly. Her tender eyes, mistily pleading, sought his. Her figure was bent close to him in supplication. The man remained silent.

"I am in thine eyes, then, such an one as Nin-Gul. No wonder thou lookest not on

me twice." She turned away from him, dropping, broken, for this was a complication unforeseen in Bethulia.

"Nay, Judith, I was wrong!" The words fairly burst from Achior. He caught her by the arm almost roughly and whirled her so that her face looked up now joyously into his. "I know not why thou art here. It is not because thou fearest to die. Thine eyes are too brave for that. It is not from mere sensuousness. Thy face is too pure for that. It is not because thou wast driven out. Thou art too beautiful for that. But this I do know from regarding thee, that if thou givest thyself unto Holofernes it will be for the accomplishment of some great sacrifice beyond the comprehending of man. Thou canst not save the city, if that be thine aim, for I, not Holofernes, command the siege. *So long as I am in the camp, or Tharthan of Azotus in the camp, Bethulia is doomed.* But I have a kindness for thy people, because that I know them to be a great people against whom none can prevail if their God be on their side. I know these things, and in this I trust them, because my

mother was a Hebrew woman, too, like unto thyself, only less beautiful."

When he had begun his burst of impassioned speech, Judith had stood gazing happily up into his face. As he proceeded, first joy, then fear, and love and fear again, and lastly wonder most amazing reigned in her eyes. Achior's mother a Hebrew! It seemed too marvellous, too joyously marvellous for truth.

"And why art thou not of us?" She asked the question softly.

"Nay," he answered. "My father was of Ammon. He captured her, even, even"—he ended it tenderly—"as I would lawfully capture thee, sometime, Judith?"

She passed over the question, though her heart was pounding loud its delight. "How was it?" she said.

Then, standing there with the camp behind, the city above them, and both for the time almost forgotten, he told her the simple story of his tragedy. How his father when a young man had raided against the tribe of Gad and seized a beautiful woman. He loved her. She loved him and was happy

as his wife until Achior, their son, had grown unto manhood and had also taken to wife a maiden of the Ammonites, in accordance with the selection of his mother. That mother had also taught him there was one God, the God of the Hebrews, to whom all other gods, even Bel and Assur, were as worse than nothing. Then came the day when Achior went forth on a month's hunt in the hills and returned to find the headless bodies of his mother, wife, and sire. A party of marauders, Moabites, had done it. This he learned from the few survivors of the little town, who told him that his wife might have lived, but she scorned the leader of the robbers and died for her scorn. The marauders put the three heads, the father's, the young wife's, and the mother's, on a pole and carried them away. Now, one of Achior's main hopes was to meet that Moabite and know him. Such was the simple tragedy that had driven the Ammonite into the service of the Great King, where now, five years later, he was reckoned among the leaders.

Judith, listening to the chief actor's re-

lation of the tragedy, scarce remembered the great game and Bethulia in her interest.

"And that is the reason of thy kindness for our people," she said, at last.

"Nay, mistake not," he replied, smiling. "I had almost forgot the kindness until I saw thee."

"And that God?" she asked him.

"I know only that if He be against me, neither I nor Holofernes, nor all the army of the Great King can take Bethulia!"

"And thou?" she spoke it softly, lovingly.

"I shall do my duty while in the service of the Great King unto the full measure of it, but also I shall of a surety protect thee, and some day"—he caught her impulsively, crushingly to him—"thou shalt be wife to Achior, the Ammonite Hebrew."

She struggled to break from him. "Thou must not! Thou shalt not!" she cried. But before, laughing softly, joyously, the man let her go, his lips had met hers, and Judith knew herself to belong to him, for that no other man except the dead Manasses had ever touched her.

Panting with short, quick breaths, her

lips blood-red from his kisses, her cheeks burning, her conquered eyes stretched wide in shy appeal, she stood and gazed at him. Then her questioning eyes grew suddenly frightened.

"Thy side!" she cried. "Thy side!"

Achior glanced down. A broadening red smudge had appeared on his tunic. His dagger sheath was empty. The weapon lay on the ground, its point red. It had been caught in the chain of Judith's bracelet as he drew her to him, and the sharp knife, jerked from its sheath, had struck him lightly in the side. The wound was trivial.

"'Tis an added bond: I've shed my blood for thee," he said, stanching the wound as she picked up the dagger. "Nay," as she offered the dagger to him. "Keep it and use it, if thou shouldst be compelled, on anything but thyself. And"—he opened his arms wide in the very joy of conquest—"Oh, Judith!"

Something heavy hurtled through the air from above, and a mighty splash in the mountain-stream startled the man and woman. The huge rock hurled by a watchful

sentry on the city wall was as a messenger of warning to Judith. The love-light faded, to give place to stern courage in her eyes. The lines of her face set, making it seem older, harder.

"Nay," she said, and her voice mingled in equal parts, weariness and sorrow; "thou hast forgotten duty. Thine is to take Bethulia; mine is—is—harder still." And she turned back towards the camp.

When they had quite gone, a black-haired, bold-eyed woman and a sneaking little man rose up from behind a pile of big stones a little way up the pass.

The sentry on the wall had seen something.

IX



QUEEN, be not greatly alarmed in thy heart. It is only thy servant, Jazen of Moab, who would speak with thee."

His voice was most humble and supplicating. The reply came in tones firm and decided.

"I am not a queen, only a woman of the Hebrews; neither do I know aught of Jazen of Moab."

Judith stood at the entrance of her tent, boldly facing the intruder. It was the morning of her second day in camp, the morning after her interview with Achior at the spring. Now the little Moabite stepped close to her.

"But this concerns Nin-Gul, who hath a hatred against thee and thy life," he half whispered.

The Hebrew woman had become too constant a companion of Death to fear him in a new form. She did not turn pale nor cry out. Instead, she only looked closely into the man's eyes to find out what he really meant. His eyes were will-o'-the-wisps —dodging all about her searching gaze. She saw they were too little to be honest, too shifting to be true, too shallow to hold aught but treachery and guile. But she saw more, too, for something showed her that the treachery this time was to Nin-Gul. When she knew these things, Judith stepped aside. "Enter," she said. And the man passed on into the tent before her.

Thoroughly afraid of Nin-Gul, Jazen had determined on a bold stroke. He knew that her hatred of Achior, though bitter now, would not be lasting. Once Judith had been put out of the way, she would hold Achior as a check on Jazen. This Hebrew woman, the trickster knew, was the real cause of all the trouble, and he felt that above all things she must be preserved and well taken care of until Achior had been settled. Then he, Jazen, would be ready to help Nin-Gul kill

the Hebrew woman, or the Hebrew woman kill Nin-Gul, whichever course might then seem to his best advantage.

Once inside the tent, Jazen looked about him curiously. It had been the tent of Nin-Gul, and its rich red and black draperies, its ivory couch, its mirror of polished brass, its fine carved seats, had all been chosen with an eye to her particular adornment. Nevertheless, the whole effect became its present owner wondrously. In former times, Jazen remembered the tent had seemed what it was, the home of licentious love. Now, in two days, and without the curtailing of its beauty, the place had undergone a complete change, for it had become the abiding-place of a pure woman. It was the same, yet not the same. The old air was changed, for a woman's soul had purified it.

The rude Moab, not understanding such things, could only wonder.

"Speak!" said Judith when they faced each other within the tent.

Jazen was a little man with whom directness had long been a crime. Straightway he began to wander in a wide circle about his object.

"Thy beauty, O Queen, hath greatly moved the heart of thy most humble of servants. Thy virtue hath stirred me. My life became greatly magnified above itself at the sight of thee. Merely to have something that thou hadst touched would be an honor exceeding above the merit of thy servant."

Judith stamped on the ground, exclaiming in a rage: "See, I have stamped upon the earth; if thou thinkest as thou sayest, gather up that I have touched and depart speedily —speedily."

Jazen fell on his knees, whining out his supplication.

"Nay, nay, O Queen, but extend thy sceptre in kindness to me, for I see that thou art of exceeding wrath as well as greatness towards thy servant, who would only do thee good."

"Then speak it forth directly," urged the angry woman.

"Verily," said Jazen, rising, "it is Nin-Gul who hateth thee."

"I knew that," interrupted Judith, coldly.

"But—but—most glorious one, thou must

of a truth befriend me in this against the great wrath of Nin-Gul — the Destroyer." He was grovelling on the ground, seemingly in an excess of uncontrollable fear.

Judith looked down upon him, sneering.

"Thou dost not have to tell unless thou wishest," she reminded, gently.

"Nay, but overpowering love of thee doth compel," rejoined Jazen, gradually recovering his upright position with little jerks and twists.

"Then for thine own sake and mine, tell —tell quickly and depart." Judith was losing all patience. Jazen saw that he must speak out.

"She hath poisoned the mind of Holofernes against thee. She hath consulted the wise men concerning the dreams of Holofernes, that she may overthrow thee with wisdom. She hath gotten love philtres to give Holofernes, and powders to make thee lose thy beauty. Finally, she hath prepared a sure poison for thee. Drink no wine of her sending, eat no fruit of her giving, wear naught of her offering, and remember that Jazen told thee of it."

With the end of the speech his swift, sneaking glide carried the trickster out of the tent. Judith only looked after him and laughed.

Two women—one dark, glorious, defiant; the other of a higher type, beautiful, contemptuous—faced each other in the tent that had been Nin-Gul's.

"And thou lovest not my lord Holofernes?" She of the black hair shot forth explosively the combined question and impeachment.

Judith merely drew up her shoulders, raised her eyebrows, and lifted her upper lip to smile at her defeated rival's rage. It was that sort of smile which men, receiving from men, kill one another for.

"Nay," she said. "And what concern may it be of thine whether I love or whether I do not love thy monstrous, black-bearded soldier. Thou hast Mesha, and only this day my lord Holofernes, who thou hast declared knoweth all things, made plain unto me that the love of thee and thy new lord was perfect." She paused with a little

deprecatory wave of her hands that said as plain as words, "What more canst thou want?"

For a moment the hand of Nin-Gul stole to the little knife concealed in her bosom, but Judith only smiled at the movement, and with a little laugh the Assyrian let her hand fall.

"Mesha!" The heart-sick contempt of the tone could not be put in words.

Judith smiled more blandly than ever; for women are often the most cruel to one another, and the conquering Hebrew was paying off on the late favorite a few of her own bitter feelings of despair. Now the woman of power spoke again in the lazy tone of courteous weariness.

"Nay, if thou hast a desire for my lord Holofernes, take him. Thou canst have him, if he desireth the same also. I wish no unwilling prisoner of the heart."

Beaten at every point by the woman as superior in wit as she was great in beauty, Nin-Gul stood dumb. Trembling, her eyes wild, her face twitching, her heart held tight in despair, she could only turn towards the

opening of the tent to hide from Judith that choking which could not find expression. And she entered the half-hour before with such different feelings!

Just when the sun was beginning to yawn his way down towards the west and sleep, she had humbled her pride and had come to the tent of Judith, offering a jar of rich wine, heavy with death. In the tent of Mesha she had prayed all the night before to her gods for aid: To Nebo, God of Oratory, that he might make her sweet of speech; to Allat, Keeper of the Under-world, that she might prepare a place for an enemy; to Anu, God of the Sky; Mulge, Mother Earth; and Ea, the Wise One of the Deep, that they might refuse longer to shelter one who had stolen love; to Bel, the Sun God, and Bilat, his wife, that together they might frown upon, and to Rimmon, the Thunderer, that he might cast forth his bolts against, the interloper. Lastly, she had breathed her prayer to Nin-Gul, the Destroyer, whose child she believed herself to be. "How long, O Nin-Gul, my mother, will I be afflicted?"

And all had been in vain. Judith had

given some of the wine to the fine dog of Holofernes, and then talked quietly to her visitor while the animal writhed and died on the floor of the tent between them. Then when the dog was quite dead she, apparently remembering an overlooked courtesy, had offered some of the wine to Nin-Gul. That provoked the storm which was ending thus in Nin-Gul's utter discomfiture.

She had just reached the opening of the tent when Judith called her.

"Nay, thou hast forgotten thy wine, Nin-Gul. Perhaps Mesha might find it pleasing, or thou mightst give it to my lord Holofernes. I shall tell him what fine wine thou hast. Jazen of Moab had spoken to me about it." The tone breathed distilled friendship filled with barbed arrows.

Judith had guessed aright. It was a shrewd stroke, setting the tricksters against each other.

Nin-Gul, now suddenly made voluble, whirled back into the tent. "Jazen told thee? Nay, if such be true, I will tell thee of Jazen, too, and thou shalt tell it unto Achior. Say unto him that Jazen is he that

placed the three heads upon the pole; then" —she concluded with a little anticipatory laugh of tigerish triumph—"Achior will kill the sly fox."

"But why should I tell this unto Achior?" asked Judith, with great show of unconcern.

"For the reason that—that—" and now Nin-Gul's eyes were searching Judith's as only a jealous woman's can—"thou lovest him," she ended, softly. And straightway she burst into wild, triumphant laughter at what she saw, for even the cool, sea-green depths of Judith's eyes were not dark enough to hide her secret from another woman.

"Verily!" cried the beautiful Assyrian, laughing. "Tell unto him what I have said." Then she sobered suddenly and went on, her musing voice displaying in her next speech all the simplicity of the untutored child. "Achior might take thee unto wife. Holofernes will never. Yet thou wilt not give Holofernes unto me, when even I, a dancing-girl, can tell that thou couldst love only as a wife." She paused, puzzled, thinking.

Now Judith spoke sharply to break her

thoughts ere she should suspect. "If thou in thy little thoughts hast come to believe that I have a kindness for this Achior, look well and mark well at the banquet this night what thou shalt see. And, furthermore, if thou sayest aught of this matter to Mesha or to my lord Holofernes, then my lord Holofernes shall cut off thine head close from thy shoulders at my desire."

Then when Nin-Gul had gone forth from the tent, downcast, Judith fell on her knees with her old prayer: "O Lord, Father Almighty, give Thou me courage for what I must do!"

X



MULGE, our Mother, show unto us beautiful women!

"O Assur, our War-lord, make us strong in the battle to gain such!

"O Nebo, the Speaker, make our words as sweet honey to hold them!

"O Ea, the Wise One, make us deep, far beyond their own thinking!

"O Bright Bel, the Sun God, greatly dazzle their eyes so they see not!

"O Istar, the Wondrous, hearing, give heed to thy servants—"

The Assyrian love-chant rolled forth unsteadily thunderous from the throats of the feasters in the tent of Holofernes. Most of them were at that stage in their wine when men, according to their natures, are either talkative or brutal. Being ordinarily brutal, the Assyrian officers were now talkative.

Sangar of Carchemish, the most loved of Holofernes and the most reckless of them all, clambered to his feet, catching one of the spears that supported the rich canopy above his general's head to hold himself upright. "Nay," he cried, waving his wine-cup; "why do we beseech Mulge Mother to show unto us beautiful women? Rather should we petition my lord Holofernes, for the most beautiful of them all, Istar's own child, resteth safe under his protection."

"Yea! Yea!" cried the chorus. "The Hebrew!"

Sangar turned to the great Tartan.

"If it may vouchsafe to please thee, my lord, wilt thou not order thither the Hebrew, for the everlasting delight of thy servants' eyes?"

Holofernes was warmed enough with wine to listen. He signed to Bagatha, the eunuch, who went quickly to fetch her.

Jazen, the sly one, arose with his oily speech. "If it may please the great prince to listen to the words of his humblest of servants, might not also Nin-Gul appear, for she, too, is very beautiful."

Holofernes was more than pleased with the last suggestion. And so it happened that the two came in almost together, Nin-Gul a little preceding, just as the very darkest of the night immediately precedes the dawn to make the rising sun more beautiful. Nin-Gul came arrayed in her finest robe of richest colors; she came laden with rings and bracelets, anklets and ear-stones, all that could set off her brilliant beauty to best advantage. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks were glowing, while against the dark masses of her hair strings of rich pearls, woven in, shone palely.

After her walked Judith, unadorned, save for the plain black robe and golden ornaments she had worn when first she came into the camp two nights before.

When Nin-Gul appeared, the soldiers looked at her with the eyes of connoisseurs, and as she took her place beside Mesha, nodded their heads in approval. Judith they greeted with shouts of welcoming admiration.

"Istar's daughter!"

"Come, thou most beautiful of the Hebrews!"

"Who would not fight a people that boast such women!"

"Nay, the maid-servant in thy house is good enough for me!"

"Our prayer is answered!"

So it ran, each man trying to outdo the other in vociferous praise. Only two were silent. Achior, the Ammonite, said nothing, but the swift under-glance he caught and answered as she entered contented him. Tharthan of Azotus was quiet, too, that he might the better watch his young friend.

Judith walked forward modestly and stood with head bowed in the centre of the tent, a quiet rebuke to the debauched scene. She raised her head and the fluttering blood that made her cheeks now red, now pale, made also men's breaths to flutter with the colors. With accustomed gesture she swept the hair back from her face and fixed her eyes, now big and black with that dangerous darkness which betokens unknown depths, straight upon Holofernes. The eyes of the great Tartan wavered, then fell under her steady, fearless regard, and his following

speech came nearer to apology than any he had ever made.

"Judith of the Hebrews, I sent for thee that thou mightst eat, drink, and be merry with us."

She bent her head again, and her voice, low, mellow, caressing, answered him: "Who am I that I should set myself up against my lord? Whatever is wise in his eyes, that shall I do. But rather than in eating and drinking, I should be most merry sitting at his feet, catching the words of exceeding wisdom that fall from his lips."

The face of Holofernes showed his pleasure at the speech.

"Nay, thou shalt sit beside me on the couch," he said, quickly; "for thou hast found great favor in my eyes." And he made room for her on the couch.

Then the drinking and the toasting began anew, for the great golden bowl of the rich wine of Helbon was not half emptied. Holofernes, busied in his attempts to get Judith overcome with wine, paid little attention to the others. But Judith, guided by the warning look of Achior across the

table, touched sparingly what was offered and kept her head. Achior himself was making much ado at keeping up with the others, but about his feet stood a little pool of the wine he had cautiously spilled.

And so the feast moved forward with rude jokes and vulgar songs, while each succeeding moment the speech of the guests became wilder, their gestures fiercer, their passions more inflamed. Holofernes remembered something of interest he must tell his officers.

"Peace!" he roared, and at that voice even the most drunken straightened himself into wavering, bibulous attention. The Tartan went on: "A messenger hath this very day brought unto me word from the Great King. The peoples dwelling in the mountains of Ange have failed to send tribute. Merodach Baladan hath been among them raising forces to march against Nineveh."

A snarl of drunken, contemptuous rage ran about the board. Instantly Sangar of Carchemish was on his feet. "If it may vouchsafe to please thee, my lord, give thou me permission to punish the traitor."

A dozen leaders were up by this time.

"Nay, this is my opportunity, my lord!" Mesha, Prince of Moab, cried it.

"Give it unto me, O Holofernes!"

"Thou hast promised me something!"

Urtaki of Elam and Erioch, King of the Elicians, were fiercely vociferous. The others were clamoring so wildly that Tharthan of Azotus called across to Achior: "Nay, but the little dogs do bark most courageously for a tender bone!"

Holofernes ended it in his own short, fierce way.

"Have done! That one shall go whom I make known unto you in the morning."

And from noisy crying of their claims, the various leaders fell into minor snarlings among themselves as to their respective abilities.

The oily Jazen was on hand with his attempts to soothe matters. "Why is it that you fight among yourselves to go?" he said. "For of a surety he that goeth must miss the fall of Bethulia, which cannot now be long delayed."

"Verily, that is so," spoke up Kerak of

Haresh, a renowned looter; "for this very day one fell from the wall clean down into the pass, for that he was too weak to keep himself on the height."

Judith, hearing, shuddered all over, then forced herself to speak.

"And thou sayest one fell? What manner of man was he?"

"Truly, that were hard to say what manner of man he had been," laughed Kerak, "but so drawn by hunger was he, so dried out from thirst, that his skin was just over his bones with nothing between, and he floated down into the pass like a feather rather than fell from the wall. He struck not with the thud of a body, but as a stick hitting a rock."

"The fifth day is almost at hand, when Achior leads his men over the wall," said Tharthan of Azotus.

"And the spoil!" exclaimed Kerak.

"The women!" cried Sangar, ecstatically.

"Nay, they will be too starved for beauty," answered Erioch, sadly.

"Thinkest thou so?" retorted Sangar. "Behold the one that hath come unto us."

"Nay," sneered Dibon of Moab, meaningly, "she is not one to starve in a city full of men."

The next moment Dibon lay bleeding on the ground; for quick as unseen death, Achior had struck down the Moabite with his own dagger. The tent was in an uproar. Men were yelling, swords were flashing, the wine from the overturned golden bowl ran in and out among the fallen benches, mingling in a red river with the blood of the victim. And there, beside the couch of the unconcerned Holofernes, her hands clutched at her heart, her love in her face, her soul in her eyes, stood a woman gazing across the tumult at the cause of it. For upright above the wounded man was Achior, the quiet, the self-contained Achior, now waving the bloody dagger and crying wildly, defiant: "Come on, ye dogs of Moab! Are there more who think like that?"

XI



ND then the big voice of the Tartan boomed above the uproar.

"Peace! Let no man move!"

The swords fell. His soldiers, checked, stood still, dogs of war on the leash, leaning towards the avenger and his victim.

"Nay, be not afraid," said Holofernes to Judith, quite gently, then roared out: "And thou, Achior, what meanest thou by striking down Dibon, the Moabite, a good fighting-man?"

Achior swayed and rubbed one hand across his face like a man coming out of a dream.

"Yea," he said, stupidly. "What sayest thou, my lord?" He looked down at the bloody dagger in his hand, next at the fallen one, and instantly, with a little, con-

temptuous, sneering laugh, cast the knife from him. He drew in a long breath and was himself once more.

"I believe a devil hath possessed him," murmured Tharthan of Azotus, who could not understand any man's fighting for any woman. But the woman standing there apparently contained, beside the ivory couch of Holofernes, understood fully the sudden transport of rage, and her every nerve quivered with loving sympathy for him who had thoughtlessly risked so much.

And all this while the great Tartan was waiting for his answer. "Speak," he said at last, impatiently.

Achior bowed his very lowest, that he might have a second's more time for thought. When he did speak, the sound came very slow, each word carefully weighed.

"Thou, my lord, shouldst above all know best why I struck the Moab dog, the son of a dog."

The wounded man groaned piteously. Holofernes looked puzzled. Judith's face brightened. Her quick wit surmised, and every faculty was instantly on the alert, pre-

pared to follow up assisting his line of defence.

"Nay—I?" quoth Holofernes, puzzled, while all the other soldiers looked wonderingly at one another.

"Could I," said Achior, boldly now—"could I, a faithful soldier and servant to thee, my lord, sit quiet by while aught of thine was spoken of with disparagement?"

"Oh!" Holofernes spoke as one who sees a great light. And suddenly Judith buried her face in her hands, sobbing out bitterly: "The Moab dog cast a great shame upon me, thy handmaid, my lord."

Achior's face flamed righteous anger now.

"And a great shame, I take it, my lord," he cried, "that the Moabite was not cut to small pieces, but that I of all thy gathered soldiers," and he swept them with one contemptuous gesture, "was alone permitted to seek for his lying heart with his own dagger, after that he had spoken with slanderous words of what was most dear to thee!"

Judith, following, sobbed again and louder. "Achior alone defended thine honor, my dear lord."

Then Tharthan of Azotus, eager to save his friend, chimed in. "A great shame it is upon me, my lord Holofernes, that I was not close enough to strike once with brave Achior for thee." And the old soldier walked over and kicked the wounded Dibon brutally.

Holofernes's face was a study of wonder and anger. He felt now that the Hebrew woman was about to give herself unto him, and, therefore, he should do what she wished. The voice of Tharthan convinced him that Achior had been right. Besides, what was the wounding of an under officer to a conquered prince? Nothing. Holofernes was too used to cutting off the heads of princes to think of that. And Achior's excuse was a clever sop to his vanity. Therefore, as the easiest way out, but more to please the woman, he cried: "Drag out the hound and bind up his wounds. And you"—he turned on the assembled officers fiercely — "you falterers, when next you hear aught of your lord's defamed, let not your laggard hands halt from your swords, else some of you will join that Moabite cur with wounds more grievous."

The leaders resumed their places at the board in silence, looking now on Achior in secret hate and fear. Judith had completely recovered her spirits, but Nin-Gul—jealous, suffering Nin-Gul—beside the low-cursing Mesha, was planning and plotting desperately.

The eunuchs dragged out the wounded Dibon. Earth was thrown on the remaining wet places. The golden wine-bowl was refilled, cups were replenished, and in a few minutes the drinking was going forward as though nothing unpleasant had ever occurred to check it.

Soon the talk turned again on Bethulia.

"And when do we go up against the place, Achior?" cried Tharthan of Azotus.

"On the night following the fifth day; but three suns now I lead my men over the walls. The Hebrews will be too weak to resist and we shall take the place easily." Achior laughed joyously at the thought of the fight. "It will be Damascus and Melothus over again," he ended.

As in a dream, Judith heard, and then, with a sudden, sharp, painful flash of thought,

she awoke to what it all meant. She realized that they, too, were counting the days from the time of the damming of the secret spring, and that the assault must come on the very day that the water from her cistern must be completely used up. The people would be helpless, hopeless, utterly unable to cope with the strong veterans of Achior's choosing. And with such a leader to command the attack, she realized that the cause of Bethulia was hopeless indeed. The scene at the pass the night before, when he had captured her, came to her mind, bringing blushes to her face. She thought of his words: "Thou canst not save the city, if that be thy aim, for I command the siege. So long as I am in the camp or Tharthan of Azotus in the camp, Bethulia is doomed." Her soul knew that last sentence was absolutely true. But one thing remained. Achior must be put out of the way. Her heart clutched itself and seemed to stop, but straightway there arose before her mind's eye the face of the gentle Ozias and she seemed again to hear his parting benediction: "Go in peace and mercy. The Lord

be with thee to take advantage on our enemies."

Yes, Achior was an enemy — worse still, the most dangerous of all the city's enemies— and a firm one, for had he not said: "I shall do my duty while in the service of the Great King, even unto the full measure of it; but also I shall of a surety protect thee, and—" But then she could not let herself think of the rest. He had protected her, risking his life in the assault on Dibon, and she hoped—

Achior was speaking again. She could plainly hear him, though his voice came as from a great distance. "It seemeth unto me that the great gate lacks in strength. My men shall carry big logs, and, protected by the flight of arrows from behind to clear the wall, and their shields over their heads, shall hurl themselves behind the logs against it. Then those within shall suffer by the sword."

Judith rubbed one hand across her eyes, sweeping from them all trace of love or pity. These were her people he spoke of putting to the sword. She shook herself sharply and sat upright; hard-eyed, keen, alert, a general

surveying the enemy's forces. Only she felt that she must keep constantly before her eyes the picture of suffering Bethulia while her tight, set lips rebuked the faint, pitiful murmurings of her love that would not quite be still.

Fortunately, the wine had kept any one from noticing her preoccupation. She came to herself to hear them talking of prophecies, dreams, and wise men who could tell them.

The superstitious Holofernes was talking now. "Verily," he cried, "Gibralzi, the wise man, hath questions which none can answer save himself, and he will not."

"Why doth not my lord force him?" asked Judith.

"Nay, the gods!" quoth Holofernes, all afraid.

Judith laughed. "Let him come forth, my lord, and I will answer his questions."

"Thou?" Holofernes gasped it. The others about the board stopped in horrified amazement at her speech.

"Nay, I have talked with the prophets of mine own people so that I fear no false ones," Judith answered.

"She hath a devil," murmured Urtaki of Elam, very low.

"Let Gibralzi be summoned," said Holofernes, simply.

A man so old that he had ceased to count the years, so bent that he could not have been straightened against a wall, yet, withal, so mysterious, so possessed of knowledge or the devil, so keen and bright that every soldier feared him, hobbled into the tent.

"Thou callest me, Holofernes," he chirped.

"Yea," answered the great Tartan, meekly. "Ask unto this woman thy famous question."

"And if she answer not?" chirped the wizard, for he was accustomed to exact a price varying with the wealth of the person trying the test.

"Thou shalt look unto me for the ransom," said Holofernes, as impatiently as he dared.

The little wizard posed himself and began:

"Listen thou, O woman, to the question which none have answered: What is in the house? What is in the secret place? What is fixed in the foundation of the house? What existeth on the floor of the house? What is

in the lower part of the house? What goeth down by the sides of the house? What in the ditch of the house maketh broad furrows? What roareth like a bull? What brayeth like an ass? What fluttereth like a snail? What bleateth like a sheep? What barketh like a dog? What growleth like a bear? What entereth into a man?"

When he had quite finished, Judith looked at him, and rose, smiling pityingly. "Why goest thou such a way about when thou meanest just the air?" she said.

The effect on the little man was terrible. He fell on the floor and curled up in a very agony of humiliation. Then he straightened up, straighter than he had been for half a century, and strode towards the table, wild with rage. The soldiers fell away from him hastily.

"Who taught thee?" he screamed, shaking his little finger at Judith. "Who taught thee the secret? Art thou, too, a sorceress, or a student of the stars? Thou witch!"

At that word shuddering horror pervaded the armed men. Holofernes drew away from her, while even Achior first clutched

at his sword to kill the accuser, then gazed at her, wide-eyed, apprehensive. Judith laughed easily.

"Every maid in Judea," she said, "knoweth those simple questions."

"A country of sorcerers!"

"Witches!"

"Devils!"

"Their gods are devils. They tell by witchcraft."

The soldiers were working themselves into a terrible, superstitious rage.

"Nay," the voice of Judith rang clarion clear above the rest. "We have no gods of brass or stone, nor calf of gold. The prophets of my people speak not with knowledge they have gained in such manner. Their knowledge cometh—" she paused and bowed her head a moment, reverently, then raised it to the sky—"from a living God."

XII

A MOMENT Judith stood thus, the light of her bold zeal transfiguring her face beyond the gaze of most of them; then her smile became tenderly winning. Her eyes swept round the circle until they met, and held, and questioned, and dared the eyes of Achior.

"Among you all, will no one speak for my people and my God?" she said. And her answer came as prompt as it was simple:

"I will."

Achior arose quietly from his seat, facing Judith and Holofernes.

"If thou vouchsafe to hear, my lord," he said, "I will tell unto thee the truth concerning this people that dwelleth in the mountains, and concerning their God that cannot be overcome."

"Speak," said Holofernes.

Then, in straightforward, ringing sentences that carried truth with every word, Achior set forth the story of that people as he had learned it years before, a child, from his mother, the love-exiled woman of Israel, in the Ammon hills. He told of it from the beginning in Mesopotamia, the wanderings southeastward, the four hundred years' captivity in Egypt, the miraculous deliverance, the passage of the Red Sea, the overwhelming of the Egyptian army, the forty years in the desert, the coming into Canaan, and the later history. And, best of all, in the recital he showed forth clearly that so long as the people were true to their God nothing could harm them. And, finally, he ended with his burst of eloquent warning: "Therefore, if there be no offence of this people in the sight of their God, we cannot resist them, because their God will defend them; and we shall be a reproach to the whole earth. Take warning, Holofernes!"

Throughout the recital Judith had sat in a maze, joy, proud love, and misery struggling in her soul. Now as the speaker ceased and

stood head up, proudly facing them, she, for the moment forgetting what must follow, forgetting what she must do, forgetting everything but her proud love of him, burst forth, impulsively:

"Well done, Achior!"

"Ay, well done for thee and thy people," echoed the big voice of Holofernes, "but of a surety most evilly done for a faithful servant of the Great King!"

The soldiers took their cue from their leader.

"Yea, evilly done, most evilly done, that any man should say the Great King can be put to reproach!"

All about the board they shouted it, with vile taunts and variations. Their hands were now on their swords again, waiting but the word of Holofernes. Only Tharthan of Azotus murmured, sadly: "A devil hath possessed him, sure."

Achior, absolutely unmindful of the black looks and noisy threats, stood watching Holofernes and the woman who had dared him unto death. He knew it would be death, for Holofernes thought himself so great a leader that he neither feared nor

cared for his under officers. The great Tartan took up his speech once more:

"Who art thou, Achior, that thou shouldst dare to say men unarmed, unskilled in the art of war, can fight against the Great King and prevail? Thou dog and less than dog, thou braggart soldier for hire, whom I, the greatest Tartan of the greatest King, have graciously permitted to execute the plans my great mind formed—what hath caused thee to say this thing which now must bring thine head from thy shoulders?"

A shivering sigh of horror came from the woman beside the leader, but all were too tensely strained on something else to heed it.

Achior was silent, without spoken defence, looking at Judith, telling her with his eyes "not to trouble."

Suddenly, from farther along the board, beside the regularly appointed place of Mesha, a woman's voice, high, strident in its notes of triumph, shrieked forth the accusation: "She! She! The Hebrew witch hath done this thing! She hath caused the death of Achior!" And Nin-Gul, the Destroyer, rose the better to confront her enemy.

"The witch!" one cried; but Holofernes, purpling with rage, bellowed: "Urtaki, thou dog of Elam, have a care or thou diest with the sun." And the rest were silent.

Then, before the soldiers, standing idly by, mere puppets in the present fight, the two women, the great rival forces in the camp, confronted each other. And how they faced for this the decisive fight! Both were beautiful, both were fearless, both were scheming, both were treacherous, and both were doing it for love. They were even equal in their hatred for each other. Nin-Gul, brave in her rich colors, flushed with wine, her eyes bigger, brighter, blacker than ever with hateful knowledge, her whole form trembling with the delicious joy of anticipated triumph, stood sneering maliciously at her rival. But Nin-Gul got not one glance from Judith. Instead, the Hebrew woman, standing, scarce breathing, seemed almost a statue in white and black and bronze, her lips just parted, her eyes large, fixed, gazing far out on the beyond, while the great masses of her hair hung limp, down-

cast, clinging about her shoulders and body droopingly.

"Judith of the Hebrews," the tone of Holofernes was stern and hard like his armor, to hide his feelings, "what meaneth this woman?"

The statue came to life slowly. She turned towards him with a compassionate smile.

"Nay, my lord," she said, gently, "thou in thine own heart knowest best whether or not this woman hath just cause for reviling me."

Nin-Gul gripped her hands in sudden anger at the skilful taunt that had put her at once upon the defensive.

"Nay, my lord Holofernes, vouchsafe to hear me, thy handmaid," she cried. "For I by witness will prove unto thee that whatsoever I say."

Holofernes looked from one woman to the other.

"Hear her, my lord," said Judith, and he signed for Nin-Gul to speak.

She began at top speed that she might tell all before she should be interrupted.

"Know thou, then, my good lord, that

Achior hath done this wild, this foolish thing for love of this woman, who bewitched him. But this woman of the Hebrews, having bewitched thy faithful soldier by her false arts, doth also love him. And for this I have true witness."

She paused a moment for breath. Holofernes, too, was breathing hard. His eyes had become narrow black slits to let out venomous hate on Achior; his nostrils twitched; his beard was thrust forward in wrath, while his right hand gripped the javelin at the head of the couch.

Achior stood on the very edge of death, smiling, fearful only for Judith. She stood then not looking at him, but carefully, tensely watching each flitting expression, every move of Holofernes.

Nin-Gul began again more boldly, seeing the impression she had made.

"Last night, my lord, just at the rising of the moon, Jazen of Moab and thy handmaid walked forth from the tent of Mesha, Prince of Moab. And walking in converse we came unto the pass below the city of Bethulia." She paused, while all in the

tent moved slightly forward in their interest.

"And there, my lord, our eyes beheld a most shameful thing"—the noise of the soldiers hastily pressing closer to her caused Nin-Gul to pause an instant until it had ceased, when she went forward with her story boldly: "We saw this woman in the arms of Achior. We heard their talk. We saw their kisses. We saw"—but Holofernes could stand no more.

"Jazen!" he roared.

"Yea, my lord." The little man, pale and frightened inwardly, stood forward.

"Thou hast heard the words of Nin-Gul. Are they the truth?"

"Yea, my lord, she hath spoken all truth." The little squeak after the big noise could scarce be heard.

"Only"—Jazen hesitated.

"Go on," said Holofernes, in an intense low tone for him.

"Only, my lord, also we heard this Achior confess that he, too, is of the Hebrew people by his mother. And he begged this woman that she should not sacrifice herself unto thee,

but should keep herself for him only." Jazen paused.

"I was just coming unto that part when thou didst check me, my lord," added Nin-Gul. There the plotters stood, two pictures of innocence, propriety, and devotion to the interests of their lord.

"'Tis false! 'Tis false! I am of the Hebrews by my mother, which some men knew; but the rest is false!" Achior cried it fiercely, thinking not of himself but only of Judith, for he knew full well to what lengths the jealous rage of the wilful, conceited Assyrian leader might go.

Now the silence in the tent was too deep for any small man to penetrate. Slowly Holofernes turned to Judith. Slowly he spoke, his words coming ponderously forth.

"And what sayest thou, Judith of the Hebrews?"

She faced him, head up, completely unafraid, and when she spoke it was in the quiet tone of sincere truthfulness.

"That which Nin-Gul and Jazen have told is for the most part true."

"Oh, Judith!" It was Achior's despairing cry for her.

The entire circle of soldiers gasped its amazement.

A horrible change came over Holofernes. His face grew purple. His eyes batted wildly. His beard twitched up and down in harmony with the convulsive workings of his features. All over, his body jerked in spasms of humiliated, jealous rage. At last he could speak. "Then thou and thy—"

But he got no further. The voice of Judith, high, clear, rang through his bellowing like the tone of a sweet bell in a storm, compelling attention.

"Nay, but thou shalt hear me out—"

Then there was a lull in the storm. He paused, waiting. Her voice lowered into the mellow, softened tone of sweet caress: "Wilt thou not, my lord?"

She came over and put both hands on his shoulders, then bending forward looked straight into his eyes, those little eyes now so fiercely red and black. Her face was almost against his.

"Wilt thou not, my lord? For a so wide-

reputed just judge must of necessity hear all that both sides may have to say." She breathed it low so that the others could just hear by straining forward.

The eyes of the twain searched each other for quite a minute, and then the angry signs began to fade from the face of Holofernes, his features became composed, his hand left the javelin. The red went out of his eyes, leaving them softer black, while on speaking, dawning hope showed above the jealousy in his tones.

"Nay, and that were but fair, Judith. Speak on."

She straightened and drew back so that while yet she could touch him she also faced Nin-Gul, Achior, and the rest that counted. Lastly, by her skilful step to the right she had placed herself between Holofernes and his javelin. She began with a low and slowly increasing voice: "Know thou, my lord Holofernes, and all of you, that Nin-Gul and Jazen of Moab have for the most part spoken truth so far as they could know it."

Nin-Gul and Jazen looked wonderingly

at each other. They could not understand such an admission.

"But," Judith's voice was warming now, "they knew not all or they have not told all. They did not tell how this man took me forth on pretence that I might under the wall the better tell him of Bethulia and how that it might be captured. They did not tell that I made known unto him the weakened gate and the plan for bursting it with trees. They did not tell that, having learned these things which promised rich rewards to him, a soldier, he made further pretence that in return for that which I had told him he would instruct me how that I might find favor in the eyes of my lord Holofernes by dances such as are not known among my people, and by manner of speech that is not theirs. They did not tell, further, of the lying promises he made unto me, saying that he, too, was a Hebrew by his mother, and asking that I go hence from the camp with him and dwell in the mountains among the Hebrew people. Nay, even, he said that he could save Bethulia and keep the army of Holofernes, the power of the Great King, out

of the pass. They did not tell how that at the last, becoming aflame for lust of me, that man did seize me in his arms and hold me struggling to him, forcing his hot lips upon mine. They did not tell how that I fought and cried out and, at the last, struck him with this, his own dagger, so that he let me go safe from him without further wrong."

And drawing quickly from her bosom the easily recognized dagger of Achior, she held it up so that all might see. "Strip off his tunic," she cried, in triumphant climax, "that you all may see the truth of that which I have spoken."

A dozen men seized Achior. Rough hands tore at his tunic. Loud voices cursed him.

"Stand back, all," gasped Judith, quickly, for there were drawn daggers in that crowd. The men obeyed, and there, revealed by the torn tunic, plain so that all could see, was the now rudely bandaged gash in Achior's side, made the night before by the falling dagger.

Judith turned quietly to Holofernes. "Art thou now convinced that Nin-Gul and Jazen

and I all have spoken with some truth, my lord?"

She smiled indulgently not only upon him, but also on Nin-Gul and Jazen, standing there desperate, shaking with fear before her. They had but one weak move more, and in desperation Nin-Gul played it.

"If thou didst not love him, why didst thou call on him to speak for thy people?"

And Judith crushed her utterly with the contemptuous retort: "Nay, fool, I did that but to trick him into unlawful speech, that I might revenge myself upon mine enemy."

Nin-Gul, abashed, fell back in hopeless defeat, defeat the more terribly humiliating for that she knew she should have won. The battle was over. Judith ruled the camp.

XIII



ROM the beginning of the fight, rage, joy, and love had played at hide-and-seek over the features of Holofernes. Now he reached again suddenly for his javelin, but Judith was in between.

"Nay!" she cried, sharply; "answer, my lord."

Then love beamed ascendant in the face of the Tartan.

"Thou art without guile," he said. "And of all things thou art most dear to me. And, there" — he pointed out contemptuously Achior, Nin-Gul, and Jazen—"I had thought to do it myself, but since thou standest between me and the javelin, let them die by the sword at the rising of the sun."

Nin-Gul collapsed, writhing and sobbing

on the ground. Jazen's shaking legs scarce held him up, while the cold dew of fear stood out in great beads upon his face.

The heart of Judith leaped with pain, and, faltering, she tried her last great move.

"But, my lord, Nin-Gul and Jazen have been friends to me. Had they not come boldly for thy honor, I had not dared of mine own self, unsupported by witness, to make accusation against that man, a high officer in the army. Therefore, I forgive them not coming to my aid. I hold them friends, and ask thee, my lord, to pardon them, for by their help I am revenged upon mine enemy. Wilt thou not, my lord?" She cooed it to him in tones of loving supplication.

"Yea, if it pleaseth thee, thou canst have the dog's and the she-dog's lives, Judith," blurted the Tartan, "but the man" — and his face grew blacker.

"Ay, the man," she took the words out of his mouth. "I only asked the others' lives that I might devise twice harder punishing for him."

"And thou canst have that wish, too, O

Judith of the Hebrews," cried out the judge, with a great roar of joyous laughter.

From the beginning of Judith's defence Achior had stood silent, sinking at each argument, each lying turn of hers, deeper and deeper into the apathy of utter dejection. When he finished his speech for the Hebrews' and her God, he knew that he must die, and waited, silent, contemptuous, for the ending of it. But this last degradation, the pardoning of Nin-Gul and Jazen that he might suffer the more, proved too much even for his stoical endurance. His form straightened; his eyes, smouldering, blazed once more with the old light, while in his old voice of accustomed power he broke forth with his curse against the woman.

"May those kisses on thy lips burn in thy soul as fires forever, O Judith, harlot of the Hebrews! May every lying speech that thou hast made be as an added pain to thee at dying! May every child that thou mayst bear be worthy of such a mother! May every drop of blood that I shall shed be equalled in thy tears! And mayst thou live long in thy harlotry after that thou hast lost

thy beauty, so that thou mayst know well the brutality of many masters! Finally, mayst thou die dishonored and be buried not at all!"

And then he turned from her, crushed, to Holofernes, with a rebuke for his old chief.

"And thou, O Holofernes, who wouldst kill a faithful soldier on a harlot's word, know thou that Achior regretteth only his taking off before that he hath had a chance to humble thee and thine army, for I renounce thee utterly, and stand now thy sworn enemy, the more bitter for the very few hours that I yet shall have life."

Judith again prevented the use of Holofernes's javelin.

"Not that, my lord," she exclaimed; "for I have a better way. Nor shall he die straightway by swords, for that would be too soft a passage hence."

Now her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes, as she bent them on Holofernes, were big and sparkling at the near culmination of all her plans.

"Thinkest thou, O Holofernes, I could be content for this man who hath so dishonored

thee, who hath put such a shame upon me, to go simply hence? Nay," and her tone concentrated, "an awful death must be devised for him."

The surrounding soldiers nodded their approval, while Holofernes exclaimed, in his enthusiasm: "Thou shalt have thy way, O Judith, for in this, as in other things, thou art proving thyself most wise."

"Then, my lord, this man hath made his boast wildly that he before the assembled earth could put a great shame upon thine arms, thine army, and the power of the Great King. Therefore, that it may be shown unto all just what manner of false boaster he is, let that opportunity be given unto him. Let thy servants steal forth this night, carrying him secretly, and leave him bound at that great gate which he would have burst in with trees. Only let careful watch be kept lest he escape ere that time when the citizens of Bethulia shall have taken him in. Then, once in the city, he shall see how truly small is his power against thine and the power of the Great King. And, lastly, let this be done that he may

suffer the very bitter extreme of hunger and thirst, and die many times ere his sides welcome the merciful swords that end it. For so shalt thou, O Holofernes, be proved the greatest soldier of the world, and thou and I be best revenged."

Her tones fairly hissed with seething hate at the last, and she stood, hands clinched, the picture of fury, regarding Achior. A great roar of delight went up from the assembled soldiers, but above all the voice of Holofernes sounded loudest.

"Thou hast pronounced his doom, O Judith! See to it that it be done at once."

And in a tumult of noisy joy, the soldiers dragged Achior forth from the tent. In the rush, Jazen and Nin-Gul found themselves side by side.

"Jazen," the woman whispered, "didst thou hear the fierce lies she told? Meet thou me in the tent of Mesha for another plan."

But Jazen drew back from her, laying his hand upon his sword.

"Nay, woman," he said, "have a care that I be not constrained to do thee hurt. Thinkest

thou that I, a faithful servant of my lord Holofernes, would hear aught against what he holds dear?" And he passed on virtuously to see to the safe watching of Achior.

The look that the jealous, desperate Nin-Gul sent after him would have warned Jazen had he seen it.

Judith, her face softened from fury into exquisite pain, gazed after the hustling crowd until the back of the last mantle had disappeared from the tent; then, with another quick change to smiles, she turned to Holofernes.

"Nay, my lord," she cried, anxiously, "something there was that did escape me, a curse of my people that I would put upon this Achior. Wilt thou send for him?"

The delighted Holofernes did not hesitate, but signalled to the guard. Two soldiers brought in Achior, unarmed, bound, his mantle and tunic torn to shreds, his body bruised, but without serious hurt.

"Now, my lord," said Judith, "make thy guards stand back, and thou, above all, my dear of soul, close tight thine ears, for this

curse of my people doth utterly blast within ten days him hearing."

The Assyrian guards sprang like madmen to the far side of the tent, while superstitious Holofernes, breathing prayers to Assur, covered tight his eyes and ears.

Judith came slowly around the banquet board and approached Achior in the centre of the tent. And as she came, her face grew such that the bound man gazed on it in absolute amaze.

"Achior!" and the voice, low so that none could hear but him, gentle beyond measure, carried with it a tone that, against his will, made the hot blood pound triumphant through the prisoner's body. "Dost thou remember thy speech last night—'So long as I am in the camp or Tharthan of Azotus in the camp, Bethulia is doomed?' Well, Achior"—and her voice was more gentle than ever now—"through me thou art about to go forth from the camp. Take my greeting unto gentle Ozias. Say unto him that within five days, according to the will of the Lord, all will be accomplished. Remember in Bethulia thy curse against Holo-

fernes, and above all, Achior, remember always—that I love thee!"

"Judith!"

"Ho!" she screamed in sudden rage. "The dog would revile me back. My lord Holofernes, guards, seize upon him. Mayst thou day and night, until thou diest, remember that which I have put upon thee, Ammonite!" And with her still screaming, they dragged the man from the tent.

Judith turned and stood where she was, looking at Holofernes. He rose from the couch, came around the banquet board, and without a word seized her in his arms.

"Nay, my lord, not yet!" she cried. "There is more that I must do for thee ere I give myself up utterly unto love."

"Thou hast rid me of my bitter secret enemy," said the Tartan.

"And for that, my lord, I claim a reward."

"Reward!" Holofernes frowned.

"Yea, my lord"—her arms sought about his neck coaxingly. "It hath been said, I know—" she paused.

"Speak on," said Holofernes.

"It hath been said, my lord, by people of

ill-repute that thou hast accomplished much through the wisdom of thy generals, rather than thine own power. Such speech hath pained me, for I, knowing what manner of man thou art, had rather that thou shouldst command alone, without, for advisers, Achior or Tharthan of Azotus, or other would-be-wise men of war."

Holofernes laughed loud in confident delight.

"Such a thought hath been in my heart, too, O Judith; wherefore in the morning Tharthan of Azotus goeth back with twenty-five thousand horse and footmen to help the Great King against Merodach Baladan. Then, Judith—" He tried to catch her in his arms, but she avoided him.

"Then, my lord, I promise thee that through me the siege of Bethulia shall come to an end in three days."

He moved towards her, but she kept backing away towards the entrance of the tent.

"Nay, my lord, I am holding myself safe for thee against that time when, Bethulia having fallen and Achior having died, thou

shalt hold me in thine arms an added prize of victory."

And gripping Achior's dagger at her bosom for protection, Judith fled quickly to her own tent, where, woman fashion, she wept until the dawn. For her heart was with a bound man lying alone beneath the cold, unfriendly stars, against the great gate of Bethulia.

XIV



NAN, the commander of the forces, inspecting his guard on the wall of Bethulia, thought he heard a faint moan below him just at the big gate of the city. He looked down, but could see nothing.

"Didst thou hear aught?" he asked the guard.

"Ay, captain, a moan sounded not once nor twice, but at the least ten times. We think"—and the guard shivered—"'tis perhaps the spirit of Zaal, who fell from off the wall, now clamoring about the city."

"Spirit!" snorted Enan. "If it were Zaal he would not wish to get back within Bethulia." The moan sounded again from below. "Nay, that hath the sound of some one in trouble. It is a man wounded or—or a trick of the Assyrians."

Again he looked down, but the dense clouds across the face of the moon kept everything from sight. Then the west wind, rushing up, pushed back the clouds until from behind the shrouding veil the moon burst forth, clear, beautiful, a matchless jewel set round with lesser brilliants in the vaulted blue background of the sky. It was just as the sentry on the wall called three hours before the dawn that Enan, looking down, saw by the pure light of the perfect moon a bundle wrapped in cords lying before the gate, and from the bundle came forth little gasping moans of pain. The heart of the soldier ceased almost to beat, his post-like legs refused to hold him steady; he lurched against the sentry for support, and together they leaned out far over the wall, straining their eyes at the helpless, moaning bundle below them. Could that be Judith? The question forming in the mind of Enan was too terrible for contemplation. He straightened, turned from the soldier, and ran at top speed for the steps that led down to the main gate. But if it should be merely a trick of the Assyrians!

That second thought caused him to pause, to pause just long enough to call out the reserve guard and draw it up in readiness behind the gate. Then at his signal the little gate in the big one opened, and Enan, springing through, snatched up the human bundle and stumbled back within the wall. But in that short space of time an arrow had rung against his back piece and another had drawn blood from his leg. The Assyrians had evidently changed their tactics of trusting only to hunger and thirst.

The wrapped-up figure was not Judith. That Enan knew as soon as he laid hold upon it. And now by the guard-house torch the commander of the forces saw that he had brought in a man evidently an Assyrian, but one that had been so set upon, so bruised and wounded, that the watching soldiers wondered he could be alive at all. They unbound him and laid him, still half senseless, on a bench for examination. Soon they found that only one hurt of his many, a dagger gash in his side, older than the other cuts, had been rudely bandaged. Now Enan, seeing that there were no fatal

wounds but only little cuts and torturing bruises, sent for a woman to bind up the bad places with healing salve, and applied himself to the work of restoring the prisoner. Gradually, under the rough soldier's treatment, the man revived. He twisted painfully on the bench, opened his eyes, gazed about him blankly, and murmured in a faint voice:

"Judith!"

The burly Enan dropped the box of precious salve in his surprise. Then as he scrambled to pick it up the wounded man went on, "I shall remember, Judith—I shall remember thy"—then he suddenly sat up, realizing in some part what had happened.

"What meanest thou by calling Judith? Who art thou?" commanded Enan.

"I am Achior, the Ammonite. Art thou of Bethulia?" The prisoner murmured it faintly enough, but with every passing minute more strength seemed returning to him.

"Yea; and thou art within the wall of Bethulia."

"And thy name?" persisted the man.

"I am Enan, commander of the forces for defence."

"And I did command the siege," muttered the wounded one. Then the two men looked straight, hard, with understanding pleasure at each other.

Enan next took a hand at questioning, himself.

"What dost thou here?"

"Nay, I was sent and brought," replied the man, smiling.

"Sent and brought!" snarled Enan. "Nay, do not mix words with me. I am commander, and I would know the meaning of thy wounds —why thou wast so sorely beaten and cast forth from the Assyrian camp and left bound here at the gate of the city? What trick lieth there in this?"

The Ammonite, who seemed to have recovered himself wonderfully by this time, smiled at his questioner.

"Nay, Enan, but thou must ask Judith all these things. She sent me, and at her sending the Assyrians brought me even to the gate of Bethulia, as she directed."

"And Judith—what of her?" cried Enan,

trying hard to keep the note of personal anxiety out of his tones.

"She now holdeth Holofernes in the hollow of her hand, waiting to crush him."

"And—and—hath—" faltered Enan.

The strong jaws of the questioned man came together with a vicious snap and he spoke next through clinched teeth.

"She hath not given herself unto Holofernes, and should that time come when he force her, then shall I steal forth into the camp of the Assyrians secretly to slay him."

"And thy interest?" blurted Enan, with harsh jealousy.

Achior looked the other over curiously, and then, beginning to comprehend, delivered himself with caution.

"She did save my life after that it was forfeited by an unruly tongue unto Holofernes. The Ammonites are just debtors. But canst thou give me to eat and drink? The beating and loss of blood have famished me."

Enan took from a table in the guard-house a rough maize cake and a small measure of water.

"A watchman on the wall died to-night. This was his share of the daily food. Take it, but"—threateningly—"if thou shouldst be proven false, the eating and the drinking will be for no measure of protection unto thee."

Achior laughed.

"Nay, then, thou hadst better at once take me unto gentle Ozias, that I may deliver unto him the message which Judith hath sent, saying that within the third sun by the aid of the Lord she will deliver the city."

"But thy wounds?" said Enan, repenting of his harshness.

"They are but slight and will wait. Come —to Ozias."

And on the way thither the Hebrew soldier asked, insinuatingly: "Did not Judith also send a message unto the commander of the forces?"

"Nay," said Achior, thoughtfully. "I remember not that she spoke the name of Enan."

And after that the two strode side by side, both strangely, sternly silent.

The gentle Ozias had just finished his

morning commune with his Father, and was preparing to go forth to see how fared that Father's children, when Enan with the Ammonite entered quickly.

"Ozias," blurted the blunt soldier, "I bring unto thee a man whom the Assyrians have cast forth, and who cometh, he says, with a message unto thee from Judith in the camp of our enemies. I will leave him to thee with a guard, and return anon from the wall."

Then Enan went back to his post, leaving two stout soldiers instructed secretly to kill Achior at the slightest sign of treachery. The Ammonite bowed respectfully before the aged man whose dauntless faith and courage he had so much cause to respect.

"Thy name?" said Ozias.

"Achior, an Ammonite."

"Then in the name of the living God, I greet thee, Achior. Peace be unto thee. Sit thou down."

Achior sat down slowly, painfully.

"Nay," said Ozias, gently, "what aileth thee, that every move showeth twitchings on thy countenance?"

Achior smiled wryly.

"The power of Judith kept me from death, but not from many beatings."

"And Judith?"

"I left her in the tent of Holofernes, her arms about his neck caressing him, her voice sending forth curses after me, but her eyes saying all the time plainly, 'Get thou, Achior, with all speed unto Ozias.'"

The old man sighed deeply. "May the God of her fathers protect the brave of heart. He understandeth all things, even that she should lie upon the couch of her enemy."

"Nay"—the voice of Achior was sharp, stern again. "She hath done naught of wrong beyond the telling of a few things which were not so, but which the justice of her cause demanded. She hath also my dagger for a protection, but that hath not half the sharpness of her wit."

A man whose deep, hollow eyes glared with the wildness of a beast, whose disordered garments made grotesque covering for his bones, whose cadaverous cheeks were more horrible for the swollen, blackened,

cracked lips before them, entered, calling sepulchrally, "Ozias, Ozias!"

"Here am I, Benjamin, thou fashioner of garments, speak," said the ruler, gently.

"Water, Ozias, and corn, I must have both. My mother hath died in the night for want of water."

"The illness of thy mother hath been of many years. The Lord hath at last been merciful unto her." And now the voice of the old man became suddenly stern. "She did not die for want of water, for I myself, last evening when thou wast running up and down trying to stir up tumult among the people, took her of my share. And, furthermore, thou knowest, Benjamin, that fighting-men, not talkers, have need of water. Get thou to the wall with thy weapons. Demean thyself as a brave man should and thou shalt have a fighting-man's share."

The tailor sneaked out, scowling but frightened.

"Seest thou, my son, in what queer fashion some men are made," sighed Ozias, turning unto Achior.

"Nay, father," said the Assyrian trained

soldier, bluntly, "I had struck off his head and fed his weak blood unto the swine to fatten them for braver people."

The old man smiled indulgently on intolerantly brave, hot youth.

"And the message of Judith?" he said.

"She told me to come unto thee, father, and to say unto thee that with the aid of the Lord in three days she would deliver the city."

"I pray that it may be so," murmured the old man, "for then the water will be just out."

Chabris and Charmis, the two ancients with Ozias, came in, stoutly important, for a morning conference.

"I had come sooner, Ozias," puffed the fat Charmis, "but that I was delayed by a woman who seized on my mantle, crying foolishly of her dead husband, a soldier shot through and through early this morning on the wall by an Assyrian arrow. I had hard time ridding myself of her."

The beard of Ozias twitched. His eyes blazed with righteous wrath. His tall form straightened up from the bench to his full height.

"And didst thou not stop to comfort her?" he cried. "Nay, no excuses unto me"—as Charmis tried to explain—"excuse thyself for thy hard heart to God. What, thinkest thou, is thine offence? Go! Send that woman unto me. I shall comfort her, then set her to work to ease her sorrow. Now, get thou out into the city, seek out the suffering, the ill, and the dying, and do what thou canst by thine office to comfort. Go!" And Ozias pointed imperiously to the door. Charmis waddled forth crestfallen. Ozias turned to the other ancient.

"And thou, Chabris, go and do likewise, only first send unto me young Joseph, the new captain of the guard."

When Chabris, too, was gone, the old man, with one wave of his hand across his brow, dismissed the latest cases and turned again to Achior.

"Now I would hear thy story in full, my son."

Then straight from the beginning Achior told the story of Judith, holding out only such part as concerned her love and his love, but setting forth very clearly that he, too,

had a claim to be considered a Hebrew, and that he was now ready to fight unto the death for Bethulia. When he had finished, the shrewd old man looked at him kindly.

"Thou hast told all, my son," he said, "and yet not all; but I thank thee, and in the name of the living God I welcome so brave and trained a soldier to Bethulia. Thou shalt have men under thee and I shall give thee a brave young captain for a helper. Thy duty shall be to help Judith in whatever way thou mayst deem best. Thinkest thou it will be to thy liking?" He smiled with genial slyness.

Achior knelt before him.

"Nay, up!" cried Ozias, sharply. "Thank thou my God for this, and pray that thou mayst be of service in the accomplishment of His ends."

A young soldier, handsome, strong, and brave of feature, stood before Ozias. The eyes of the ruler regarded him affectionately.

"Joseph, how are the mother and the child?"

"Both coming well and lustily, Ozias,"

answered the young father, pride and joy in his tones.

"Come hither, close to me, Joseph."

When the young man was close before him, Ozias put both hands on his shoulders and, speaking, looked searchingly into his eyes.

"Thou knowest, Joseph, what Judith did for thee. She saved the life of thy wife; she made thy son's birth possible."

"Yea, Ozias." The eyes of the younger man were troubled but unflinching.

"The time hath come, Joseph, when thou must pay that debt."

"Yea, Ozias." The tone was firm, not frightened.

The old man went on.

"The life of Judith, and what is more than life to woman, stand in grave danger. This man, Achior, an Ammonite, who, I think, Joseph, loveth her as thou lovest thy wife, for he hath given up honors and the command of half the Assyrian host for her, is now of us in Bethulia. He it is who, with Judith, seemeth by me to be chosen as the instrument of the Lord for the deliverance of His city. Therefore, Joseph, I shall give

over unto him five hundred men, and thou shalt be chief of them. All shall be under the command of Achior. Now, Joseph, go and kiss thy wife and make much of thy little son, for what thou hast done in the siege heretofore will be as nothing to what thou must do for Judith."

The jaws of the young soldier set hard; his eyes, showing mingled sorrow and elation, were yet all brave.

"In an hour I shall be ready, Ozias," he said, and, turning, saluted Achior.

XV



OMRADE, I tell thee, I know thee not." The under officer of the Tartan's guard spoke in petulant anger, for, like most under officers, he knew his position and appreciated it.

"Nay, but I remember thee," quoth the unknown, stoutly. "Thou art Jair of Bezen, and thou servest under Kerak of Haresh, though how thou art come to thy present position that I do not know. The last I saw of thee was when thou didst hide from the watch behind the robe of Nana."

A great laugh rang out from the guards off duty about the foot of the little hill on which the tent of Holofernes was pitched.

"Nay! Nay!" roared the petty officer, overcome with confusion. "Have done with

thy useless talking. Now it doth seem that in a way I do recall thee."

"'Tis strange," laughed out a big soldier, "how the word of Nin-Gul's waiting-woman should recall thee to the late-made-proud stomach of Jair."

Then a second soldier put in: "Yea, since Achior was killed and his Ammonites sent hence under Tharthan of Azotus, and Prince Mesha guardeth the Tartan, there hath been no holding of Jair."

"Peace, thou fool," roared the officer, "or thou shalt do the watching for all the guard without relief."

The second soldier wilted back in the dark shadow of the hill, and almost fell over a veteran curled up half asleep.

"Have a thought," muttered the older man. "Let the young cock crow. I was of his kind upon a time. Women get them all that wine leaves. Trust thou to Nana."

Jair moved off up the narrow way to inspect his guard, and the unknown, muffled-up soldier who had claimed acquaintance with him drew farther into the shadow, joining the little knot of soldiers about the veteran.

The old man looked over that way thoughtfully.

"Thou art an Ammonite?" he said.

"I am," answered the unknown, fearlessly.

The other soldiers drew a little away from the stranger.

"What dost thou here?" said the veteran.

"That is the question I would ask of thee. What do the Moabites about the tent of the Tartan?"

"What do the Moabites about the Tartan? Listen, comrades! Hear him!"

The group of soldiers were laughing uproariously.

"Where hast thou been?" cried one.

"Nay, friend, but I envy thee that woman who could make thee ignorant of thy leader's death, thy countrymen's departure."

A third man cried: "When came it that common soldiers got such wine to make them dead for a moon and a sun together?"

The unknown stared from one to another, helplessly.

"Nay, I have but returned from a journey," he said.

Another roar of laughter greeted it. One

soldier seized another beside him about the waist, and, drawing him over, pretended to fondle him.

"Nay, thou art more beautiful than Istar's self or Nin-Gul, or—or the Hebrew woman;" he completed it with laughter until the other, with a mighty blow, slapped him back on the ground, crying in a mock-woman's voice, "Go to, thou ass! Thou art but a skin full of wine."

The soldiers roared so loud at the rough joke that the guard cried out: "Cease the noise, fools: think you the great Tartan can sleep to the braying of asses!"

"Then be thou sure to keep still," answered one of the soldiers, quickly, amid the laughter of the others, who immediately took up a monotonous refrain:

> "Then keep thou still, ass, ass, ass;
> Then keep thou still, ass, ass, ass"—

with more impolite variations.

The guard went to the very farthest end of his beat and tried to decide just what he could do to them when he got off watch.

"Sleep!" laughed one of the soldiers break-

ing the tune. "What use hath Holofernes for sleep? Nay, I would stay awake all night and keep every torch burning that I might see every beauty of the Hebrew."

The veteran who had held contemptuous silence during the teasing of the strange Ammonite and the taunting of the guard, now waked unto life. "Thou," he sneered to the soldier who had spoken, a young man —"thou stay awake to watch the Hebrew? Thou wouldst not even do so much. My post is at the Hebrew woman's tent upon the hill, and I knew well the Ammonite guard who held it before me, and I will wager thee my spoil for six months to come that Holofernes hath not known the Hebrew."

A ripple of contemptuous laughter greeted the speech.

"Another might not, but Holofernes"— and the young soldier who seemed most bold in disputing the wisdom of the veteran lay back howling at the mere suggestion. The others seemed divided. The old war-dog sat up quickly.

"And I will tell you, babes and cubs, more yet," he snarled. "This Hebrew woman

loveth Achior, the Ammonite, and for that reason he was cast out of the camp into the city, and his Ammonites were sent away with Tharthan of Azotus, for 'twas known they would fight for no one against Achior."

"Yea," spoke up another soldier, "the Hebrew and Achior were caught together."

"How knowest thou that?" It was a chorus of excited queries from the others.

"The guard at the post around the hill, whom Jair did tell, told me. And Jair, you all know, hath Nana, Nin-Gul's waiting-woman."

"Ay," spoke another, "and Nin-Gul is most hard to serve, 'tis said, since coming from the tent of Holofernes unto Prince Mesha."

"He thinketh that she doth love him!"

And the soldiers laughed uproariously at the joke.

"And Nana doth hate her much," spoke up a third, while a fourth remarked, "Jair doth be getting fat with good living; he should be glad that he no longer must climb the rope at night to Nana."

The young soldier laughed.

"'Twas a hard pull up the sheer cliff-side."

The veteran put in now.

"Achior, the Ammonite, knew of it, but did instruct his guards to be merciful to the lovers."

"And now Jair," laughed the young soldier again, "that none may spy on the time he cometh down, hath taken the guards from that corner of the cliff."

"How Jair doth hate Achior now!" mused the veteran.

"Have peace! Have peace!" cried the young soldier. "I thought me that with his death we had done with Achior. Ever since he saved thy useless life on the walls of Melothus, old war-dog, thou hast worked thy jaws overtime yelping for him."

"Yea, and will I still do so until thou showest me he is dead. And we shall all wish for Achior and his heavy Ammonites when we go up against the wall of Bethulia. Cornered rats die hard, and if Achior fight with them, then"—he shook his head sagely —"on the next morn the river Datilla will be crowded with our crossing."

The older soldiers looked serious, but the young one laughed.

"I tell thee," he cried, "old croaker, he is dead; for did I not this day speak with one, a Mede, who had seen another that spoke with him that shot the arrow which pierced Achior being carried through the gate of Bethulia?"

The old soldier looked at the young one with withering contempt.

"Thou thinkest that thou knowest thy father, but I know him for an ass. No two-legged being could beget such silly spawn as thou."

The young soldier jumped for the speaker, but was restrained.

"And, furthermore," continued the old soldier, "if we go not up against Bethulia before the spread of the sickness—"

"The sickness!"

"Yea, the strange sickness."

The soldiers, muttering, looked at one another white faced.

"The sickness!" A rasping little voice snarled it. "What meanest thou, dog, the last and worst of thy mongrel line of dogs—what meanest thou by thy lying speech of sickness?" And, walking into the midst of the crowd, Jazen, the Moabite, now second

only to Mesha in command of the Tartan's guard, kicked the veteran soldier with all his might.

The soldiers cringed away, afraid to speak, and cowering down closest to the wall, back of all the rest, the hooded Ammonite soldier, who had missed his command, now fearfully watched his enemy.

When Jazen, tired of his leg-exercise, had walked away, the veteran climbed painfully to his feet and started hobbling away with great difficulty, each step timed to some rude jest made at his expense by the younger soldiers. But so great was the pain that scarce had he gone ten steps ere he fell writhing on the ground. When no one moved to his aid, the old fellow called back between little moans of pain:

"O thou left Ammonite, thou hast naught to do in the camp, come thou to help me!"

Then as the Ammonite, coming swiftly, bent over him, the hurt one whispered: "Help me off, far off in the darkness. I would speak with thee."

Now the two were around the hill, on the

other side, where, in a little up-running alcove of the rock, Jair in the days of Nin-Gul's supremacy had been accustomed to catch the rope let down by loving Nana.

Drawing away from his comrade, the veteran stood up straight, evidently unhurt.

"My lord," he said, respectfully; "thou hast proved thy valor often, but seldom thy folly before."

"I thought, old fighter, thou didst know me from the first," said Achior of the Ammonites, simply, for it was he, who had sneaked back into the camp disguised where he had commanded.

The old man chuckled, well pleased.

"And thou didst trust me, my lord?" he said.

"Nay, I should have killed thee first, hadst thou said aught," replied Achior.

It was an answer right after the heart of the other. He chuckled more than ever, then drew himself up, soldier fashion.

"My lord," said he, "my life is thine. Thou canst do with it as thou wilt, for since Melothus I had not had it but for thee."

"Thou art the old fool that did jump from the wall upon the spears."

"And thou, my lord, art twice the fool that did jump after me," replied the soldier, stoutly.

Then both laughed low.

"And two such fools should entwist the sneaking fox," muttered the soldier, writhing with agony at the memory of his kicking.

"I shall kill him for thee and for me," said Achior.

"But now thou wouldst see the Hebrew woman."

"How knowest thou that, old dog?"

The veteran chuckled in his accustomed low tone.

"Young blood — young, red, hot blood— the thoughts that jump from eyes to eyes" —he made a sound of sucking in his lips. "Oh, that I were young again!" Then he recalled himself to the business at hand.

"She hath the old tent of Nin-Gul, my lord, but another tent hath been crowded in for Mesha and Nin-Gul. Thou canst get up but one way, the rope by which Jair, the Moabite, hath for long kept his trysts with

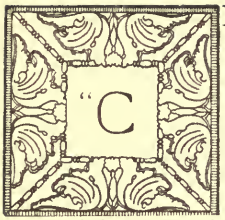
Nana, Nin-Gul's waiting-woman. 'Tis hidden above in a little hole covered by a rock. Jair hath most cunningly contrived it so that a broken javelin sunk in the hole bears his weight climbing. I will get the rope dropped, my lord, if"—he paused, trying his best to make out the face of Achior in the shadow—"this be the bargain, that thou makest no attack now upon my lord, Prince Holofernes, and on the hill thou givest naught but kisses to the Hebrew and the sword to Jazen. Remember the word Melothus, and, my lord, when thou liest in the tent of the Hebrew, if thou hearest me, guarding at the entrance, clash my shield, then hide, even though thy blood be burning and her kisses soothing the flame—hide!"

Thus they planned and plotted close under the shadow of the hill, not knowing that in the tent of Mesha on the top above them the sly Jazen was whispering unto Nin-Gul—"He hath sneaked back spying from Bethulia. I saw him plainly, hiding disguised with the guard under the hill. He must move before the sun rises, and while clouds shut off the moon. Watch thou the tent of the Hebrew

woman, while I prepare a guard that, catching them together, we may be revenged upon both."

And Nin-Gul, listening eagerly, promised, but all the while she was thinking out her own particular plans for revenge, in which the slight of Jazen to her the night before was not forgotten.

XVI



LOUDS, clouds, clouds! 'Tis of a truth most strange, Sarah, how that they do hang as a thick black veil before the face of the moon, and yet the rains fall not."

Judith, standing in the entrance of her tent, regarded with sorrow the heavily overcast sky.

"Even a little would do so much for Bethulia," she added, wistfully.

"And now it is well past the time for rain," answered her handmaid.

"Yea," said Judith. "And the ringed moon last night smiled promise, and yet to-night again before the sullen clouds drew in."

"They are black enough," shivered little Sarah.

Judith turned towards Bethulia, striving

to make out through the intense blackness the outlines of the town. But such effort was hopeless, and she turned more sadly still to the gloomier prospect on the other side, murmuring to herself: "The Lord hath turned the black looks of His anger upon His people and shut them in completely with His wrath."

Little Sarah now came to the front of the tent also.

"Hast thou accomplished aught for the deliverance of the city since we came into this place, my mistress?" she asked, timidly and low.

Judith turned towards her bitterly.

"Yea—much, much have I accomplished. I have stripped of his high honors and brought about the almost sure death of a brave man; I have caused to break the heart of a proud, a loving, and a jealous woman; I have excited the brutal lust of a great leader; I have lied; I have sneaked; I have dealt in all manner of unfairness; I have made enemies bitter unto death and no friends to combat them; I have smirched my soul in all kinds of evil doings, and saved only the purity of my body by a

forceful man's caprice: all this"—she ended, with a bitter sneer—"I have accomplished for Bethulia within these three days that I have dwelt in the tent of my enemies. And —and"—for to her it was hard to admit even possible defeat—"the face of the Lord yet seemeth averted from my efforts, and all go as naught. Yet—yet"—she mused. "He who knoweth all things must understand the purity of my heart."

"And the five days?" interrupted the maid, fearfully.

"Yea, girl, the five days are concluded with the second setting of the sun."

"And then?"

At the faint, fear-fraught question, Judith, for the first time completely unstrung, threw her hands over her face as though to shut out the thoughts and the horrible pictures it brought up.

"Oh, Achior, Achior," she half sobbed, "if thou were here to help me now!"

"What didst thou say of Achior?"

Judith started, catching her breath in fright, and then she saw it was the night-guard for her tent who had addressed her.

He was an old soldier, rough-visaged, hard-looking, and yet the tones of his voice were kindly. But his speech could not be overlooked.

"What meanest thou by questioning me?" she answered, haughtily.

The soldier came close to her before he spoke again.

"Nay," he whispered, "fear me not. I guard, I do not talk. And then I have a kindness for this Achior. He saved me at Melothus." He added, significantly: "If I could hear, why might not others who would be more glad? Now get thee in thy tent, and shouldst thou catch even the faintest clashing of my shield, be warned of urgent danger." And without more ado, the old guard pushed the women into the tent and pulled down the curtain of it himself.

Judith, blazing with wrath at such rude treatment by a common guard, turned from the entrance to find herself face to face with Achior.

Then surprise chased quick the anger from her eyes. Next they grew big with wondering fear for him, and soft with misty love to

answer and to equal the ardor of his gaze. The heart and soul of each read volumes of satisfying knowledge in the other's looks. Without spoken words they drew near to each other until he could breathe in the faint odor of her hair and feel her lips close warm upon his own. It was reconciliation, forgiveness, and love's assurance unto her, all in one kiss, so of necessity it took some time.

Now Judith stood, her hands stretched far apart on his broad shoulders, her face turned up to his.

"And thou didst come just when I needed thee, thy strengthening comfort, the most," she murmured, shaking at his heavy shoulders lovingly. Then she slipped up closer into his big arms and drew his head down to her own. "Ah, who but thee would have dared and have forgiven so much?" she whispered.

Achior answered the question in the only way a man could.

"Thou wast received in the city?" she asked, after a time.

"Verily," he answered.

"And the water?" Her eagerness was overwhelming.

"It will last two days longer without rain."

"Then may the Lord send rain! But Ozias," she questioned, "he is well?"

"Yea."

"Answer forth in fuller manner," she blurted, imperiously. "And Joseph, with his wife and child?"

"All are well, and thy house is excellently conducted."

"Who careth for that, thou foolish one?" she laughed in low-voiced delight. "And Chabris and Charmis?—they could live for years on their own evilness of heart towards Ozias."

"Yea, they thrive upon it."

"And Enan?"

"He is well," answered Achior, shortly.

"He is well," she mimicked. "Nay, that will not do. Thou must love Enan, too."

"So long as thou dost not, I will," replied Achior. But Judith only laughed at him.

"And why hast thou risked thy life within the camp?" she asked him next, when they were sitting side by side upon the couch.

"Thee," he said, simply; then added, "thou must save the city in two days, and I have come with a plan to aid thee."

"Speak," Judith said.

"Ozias hath put under me five hundred picked men, mighty fighters with sword and spear. It is the guard of Judith."

"Yea! Yea!" she interrupted. "But I would know of thee how thou didst get to me, how pass the guards. Put thy danger, too, in the telling."

"A simple thing," said Achior. "Thou hadst best heed, though, so in case thou shouldst be forced to get hence without the knowledge of any one, the way might be clear unto thee. Nana, the handmaid of Nin-Gul, hath for a lover Jair, the under officer of the Moab guard. For their convenience he hath contrived a rope which thou canst find under the big rock just back of the tent. One end of the rope is made fast in the hole, so that all to be done is to drop it over the little cliff. The guard upon thy tent did that for me, and he will be thy friend, for love of me."

"Nay, then I understand his friendly

roughness," spoke Judith; "but thou, Sarah, get thee behind the tent and pull up that rope so that none may grow suspicious, finding it dangling against the rocks."

"Nay, I did that and hid the rope securely beneath the stone ere I crawled within thy tent. But let Sarah stand there, and by her presence keep the lovers from a meeting until I shall have gone."

Going out the front entrance, Sarah walked around to the back of the tent just in time to see the muffled figure of a woman slip away.

Nana, thought Sarah, wrongly.

Within the tent Achior was hurrying forward his explanation, for he knew that he had but short time to stay.

"But Holofernes remaineth to keep up the vigor of the siege. Thy craft did get rid of Tharthan and of me," he added, with some bitterness that she instantly smoothed away.

"Nay, I did not get rid of thee. I have thee yet, and will have thee unto the end, my Achior."

"But Holofernes doth remain," said the Ammonite; "and his ridding must be the

worst of all, for"—his voice grew lower, heavier, weighted with the burden of his hate —"his bloody head upon a spear alone can be our standard of success in the freeing of Bethulia."

Judith shuddered.

"Thou thinkest so?" she said.

"Nay, it must be so," replied Achior.

"And thy plan?" she whispered.

"It must be to-morrow night. A strange sickness hath broken out in the camp, and the army must move to march it off."

"Yea, my lord Holofernes told me of the sickness, but he spoke not of attack."

A slight feeling of fear, a strange reticence, from desire for Achior, was coming over Judith as the time for a decisive move drew nigh.

"It will come in the evening, two days from this, if I mistake not the signs," said Achior.

"And what must be done?" asked Judith.

"Thou must contrive some way to lure Holofernes forth to the foot of the pass. Thou knowest the place, where—where—"

"I know," said Judith, quickly.

"The guard of Judith, let down by big

ropes from the city wall, will be in waiting behind those rocks which hid Nin-Gul and Jazen. When Holofernes cometh near we will seize him, and carry him with us up the pass. The rocks from the city wall will keep off pursuit. He will start up the pass a living man. He will reach the top in two pieces. Then issuing from the top, his head upon a spear, we charge the Assyrians gathered there, while at the same time the big gate of the city openeth to let forth the fighting-men of the place."

"But the chances of the battle?" questioned Judith, eagerly.

Achior chuckled in delight. "The Assyrian force upon the mountain-top is for the most part composed of Moabs weak from the sickness. We shall win easily. Then the guard of Judith will secure Achior's Pass, now the only way free for the Assyrians up or down, and all will be put to the sword."

He ended it with excited though whispered enthusiasm.

"And Bethulia will be saved! The name of Judith will be exalted!"

Judith had caught some of his enthusiasm.

"Art thou sure, Achior, victory will then be complete?" she begged, with a last doubt.

"Yea, Judith, for I turned away the life-giving stream and I can turn it back. Mesha hath no power, and without a proper leader the Assyrians can never force the city's pass nor Achior's Pass."

Judith rose and walked up and down the tent.

"Then it all still resteth upon me!" she murmured at last.

"Yea, thou must lure him forth, or—" he paused and looked long at her—"or thou must find some way of ending it."

"Could not your men sally forth and overcome the Assyrians on the mountain-top about the city?" she whispered.

Achior shook his head. "The Bethulians are too weak. Without the terror of Holofernes's death to aid them, they could not overcome."

He rose and drew her to him, murmuring, in a voice of mixed love and sorrow: "It still resteth upon thee, Judith—it resteth upon thee."

And then, just as he finished speaking, the spear and shield of the guard at the entrance clashed together sharply.

There was no time to get out of the tent; no place within to hide. The guard without could be heard parleying, talking loud, delaying matters all he could for Achior. The Ammonite had just time to scramble under the couch, which Judith quickly draped with lion-skins, ere the curtain was jerked from the entrance, and Nin-Gul, brave in all her finery, walked into the tent.

From her spying behind the tent, Nin-Gul had learned of Achior's presence, but the arrival of Sarah and her own consequent flight prevented a discovery of the plans, even had the voices of the lovers carried beyond the shrouding cloth. The bright eyes of the Assyrian woman sought out every nook and crack in the tent with keen, penetrating looks. She scarcely seemed to look at the couch at all, but her one swift, comprehending glance had taken in the effect of the lion-skins carefully draped over the sides, and the barest tip of a man's laced boot showing between them. Then, with

the wearied air of Eastern indolence, Nin-Gul walked over and sat down upon the couch. Judith was across the tent looking into her mirror of burnished brass.

"Thou hast not bid me welcome," said Nin-Gul at last, lazily, from the couch.

"My people know little of the art of kings' courts. We speak naught but truth, or else keep silence," answered Judith.

"Yea, since thou hast been in camp it is thy truth that hath charmed me." The defeated favorite's tone was quiet, distinct insolence, that could not be misunderstood.

Judith lost her temper.

"If thou camest here for naught but to bandy words," she blurted, "thou mightst as well go forth now again. I care not to speak with thee."

The Assyrian laughed low as though amused.

"So beautiful and so young!" she murmured.

Judith combing out her hair tugged so suddenly as to hurt herself. Nin-Gul smiled maliciously, then went on in a voice of distilled honey.

"Why shouldst thou and I be enemies, Judith?"

Judith turned instantly, her eyes big. "Nay, Nin-Gul," she said, "I am no enemy of thine so long as thou dost not try grievously to hurt me."

"We are such contrasts, Judith — thou with thy strange hair and eyes, I with mine. We should be friends, not enemies."

"I am more than willing," said Judith, generously.

Nin-Gul laughed softly in her delight. "Nay, I thought thou wouldst be," she purred, catlike. "And now I shall give to thee a proof of my warm regard by warning thee of danger. Thou knowest that Achior"—Judith could not quite control the start that Nin-Gul carefully overlooked—"I know how thou didst hate him bitterly, Judith."

"Yea, yea, Nin-Gul; what of him?" asked Judith, with exaggerated carelessness that failed utterly to deceive.

Nin-Gul purred on complacently, entirely unheeding the interruption.

"After that thou didst stab him so cruelly

with his own dagger, and cause him to be stripped of all his high honors, and to be cast into the trap among the mice of the hills, I knew of a surety what thy feelings and what his feelings must be."

"Yea, Nin-Gul, but what of him now?" cried Judith. She was in a veritable fever of anxiety and impatience, her color coming and going, her eyes shot with fear, her lips trembling, her hands twitching nervously. The very soul of Nin-Gul drank deep draughts of joy at her rival's evident discomfiture, but outwardly the Assyrian gave no sign, only beginning again the rasp of her monotonous purring.

"Knowing all these things, therefore, Judith, as proof of my friendship I have come to warn thee, for this demon Achior hath come down from the city, a spy, into the camp."

"Yea, Nin-Gul, and—" Judith was standing strained, listening with every nerve.

Nin-Gul paused just a moment to let her words have weight. "And Jazen, who thou knowest did place the heads of Achior's father, his mother, and his wife all on one

spear"—the very couch on which Nin-Gul sat quivered, but she went on, paying no attention—"now doth seek Achior everywhere, for Jazen would like a fourth head to complete the lot. I have told thee all this, Judith, out of friendship, so thou mightst have thy dagger ready, for of a surety the man will try to force his way into thy tent to do thee harm. Now, having given thee proof of my friendship, I must leave thee. I think that I shall soon have this, my old tent, again, for this day my lord Holofernes told Prince Mesha that to-morrow night thou shouldst share the Tartan's tent. Fare thee well."

And she was gone, gone to tell the waiting Jazen that Achior was in Judith's tent under the couch, and that he, Jazen, must go in and watch until she could bring Holofernes with the guards, that the traitor and the woman caught together might both be overthrown.

The guard, drawing the curtain before the entrance of the tent after the exit of Nin-Gul, found time to whisper within, "Thou hadst best be quick, my lord—thy life and mine both hang on it."

As the curtain dropped, Achior jerked himself from under the couch.

"Thou didst hear?" he whispered, excitedly, scrambling to his feet. "Thou didst hear of Jazen?"

"I knew before," whispered Judith back, "but would not tell thee. But now thou must go — go!" It was an imperious entreaty.

"Farewell, then; forget not what I have told thee. Let Sarah draw up the rope." He took her in his arms. "Beware of Nin-Gul's last speech," he whispered.

"Thou foolish one," she said, fondly.

And then, as the guard's shield clashed again, he scrambled under the back of the tent and crouched close to the edge of the cliff in the darkness outside. Judith hastily arranged the skins on the couch as they had been, and waited. She heard the challenge of the guard, she heard a man's voice answer. She watched the curtain draw aside and Jazen enter. He came in nervous, but bubbling over with the joy of his own cleverness. He felt so near complete victory that he forgot this one time to be humble.

"I have come to see thee," he said, bluntly.

"Nay, my lord honoreth his handmaid," and Judith bowed low before him. "Will not my lord deign to sit upon the couch?"

He drew back, plainly nervous.

"Nay, why not, my lord?" and Judith carelessly pulled up the lion-skins so it was evident the couch stood over nothing. The effect upon Jazen of the plain vacancy was even more startling than the invitation had been. His jaw dropped; then, quickly, anger turned his face livid.

"Where is that traitor, that Achior, whom thou didst have concealed there but a moment since?" he snarled.

Judith gave a little scream of fear. "Achior?" she cried. "Nay, my lord, say not so—he would kill me!"

"But thou didst—"

"Oh, my good lord Jazen, thou must protect me! Put thou his head upon the spear with the other three heads!"

"Ay," cried Jazen, boastfully angry, "that I will do. I will put his head upon that spear which bore the heads of the weak

father, the foolish mother, the harlot wife. Oh, if I could but catch this Ammonite!"

Whirling in his anger, he turned to the front of the tent, and there, his back against the curtain, his dagger drawn, his face showing only the cold, malignant hate of certain death, stood Achior. He had slipped in past the conveniently turned back of the watchful guard. The face of Jazen went from the livid hue of rage to the yellowish green of sickly fear without the showing of a single intervening color. His eyes seemed almost about to fall from his head, so popped with fear they were. Cringing back, trembling, he reached for his sword. Achior leaped forward. The little trickster collapsed beneath his knife and lay still upon the ground, while about the body grew a steadily widening gorm of horrid red. But Achior had no time for dead men. Now he faced Judith, whispering, fiercely: "Say thou that I, disguised, passed the guards by the word 'Melothus' and concealed myself in thy tent before the putting on of the guard for the night; that Jazen found me and died

defending thee. Give me but time to get over the cliff, then scream!"

And he slipped again from the tent, stopping but long enough to whisper to the guard, "He is dead; thou wilt not be brought in."

But Judith had views and ideas of her own. She heard the slap of the rope against the cliff, the faint noise made by a scrambling body; then she drew Achior's old dagger from her bosom and, bending, rubbed it well in the blood of the dead Jazen. There was a noise of rushing feet without, a woman's voice cried, "My lord, there is a man in the Hebrew's tent."

The curtain was torn aside, and Holofernes, led by Nin-Gul and followed by a score of guards, burst through the entrance. Judith stood upright, with bloody dagger, facing them across the body of Jazen.

"Yea, my lord!" she cried after Nin-Gul. "There is a man in the Hebrew's tent—a dead man. He would have forced himself upon me, and I slew him!"

XVII



AUGHING, Holofernes drew the unresisting Nin-Gul down close to the nimedu, or throne-chair, on which he sat. It was in the tent of the commander of the army the night after the killing of Jazen.

"And tell me truly," cried the Tartan; "why dost thou so sorely hate Judith, the Hebrew woman?"

From his lower bench, placed some distance away, Prince Mesha looked on the proceeding with unfriendly eyes.

"Nay, my lord, I do not hate her; I am her friend."

Holofernes stopped laughing to look at the woman quizzically. "Her friend? In truth a dear friend thou art, who comest running unto me, thine eyes big, thy blood all beating in thy face"—he gave a laughable,

cumbersome play of Nin-Gul's excitement—"'A man is in the Hebrew's tent! I did hear him—a man! Come, my lord, I will convince thee of this Hebrew's character!'" He fell back in his chair, quiet, quizzical once more.

"We went, did we not? and we found—we found thy dear friend Jazen, Nin-Gul—thy counsellor, Mesha—dead in his own blood, dead by her dagger for that he would have forced her."

And Holofernes exploded in a burst of laughter, sputtering forth, "Thy friend, Nin-Gul; Mesha, thy friend."

"It was Achior's dagger, my lord," gently corrected Nin-Gul.

"Yea, it was Achior's dagger," he answered her quickly; "Achior's dagger which she snatched from him to stab him with, that dagger which she seemeth to keep for all who force themselves upon her against her will."

"Then hadst thou not better beware, my lord?" suggested Nin-Gul, slyly.

The face of Holofernes darkened. "And thinkest thou," he demanded, sternly, "that the Tartan of the Great King is of a kind

with the petty counsellors of little princes or upstarts, soldiers for hire?"

Nin-Gul fell upon her knees before the nimedu. "Nay, my lord, thou knowest," she cried, piteously, "'tis but the great love and loyalty of thy handmaid that make her so bold. For reason of thy very great virtue of forbearance, it hath come to be put in men's mouths that the Hebrew woman doth rule my lord, instead of, as is proper, my lord ruling the Hebrew woman. And such speech, my lord, hath brought great trouble to the minds of thy loving servants. Thy mind, my lord, is so vast and moveth so strangely that we of poorer powers cannot know in advance the workings of my lord. Though my lord divineth, yet we know not wherefore the Hebrew woman hath come into the camp. My lord can understand such things and knoweth the reason of his own forbearance. We know only that a woman of exceeding beauty, of great wit, and of wondrous skill in the use of the dagger"—she spoke it with meaning, emphasized—"hath come into the camp from the besieged city. Why hath she come?

'Tis strange, my lord, that men who fight so stoutly, who starve and thirst so bravely as these Bethulians, would for no reason let such a woman without the wall. The bravest men desire the most beautiful women. Since the coming of this Judith into the camp she hath made Achior a traitor, she hath killed Jazen, and, my lord, she hath made thee so that thy servants know thee not." She ended it with a burst of sobbing and fell prostrate at his feet.

Holofernes turned his eyes towards Mesha.

"Raise her, Mesha," he said, and when the Moab had obeyed, the great leader held forward the sceptre of his authority for the woman to kiss, in sign of his good will.

"Thou hast spoken well, Nin-Gul," he said at last, seriously.

She sat on a bench before him, bowed over in grief. Then the deep-rooted, bitter, jealous hatred of a fallen woman for a pure one asserted itself.

"But, my lord, she doth hold herself aloof from thee. She scorned me for that I loved thee, and thee, too, she doth seem to scorn. Brave fighting-men are as the dust beneath

her feet. She hath come to be an honored guest in the camp. And thy soldiers, my lord, have wondered and have counted this as a great shame upon thee. Had the woman been seen in thy tent, then thy soldiers could have understood the honor done her. They are but Assyrians, my lord, and thou knowest the customs of thy people." It was most cleverly put, and she waited a moment for it to sink in before beginning again. "Therefore, my lord, out of the greatness of thy vast mind, make known unto them the things that thou dost intend concerning the woman and the city."

She turned to Mesha for commendation. "Speak I not truth, O Mesha, Prince of Moab?"

"Yea," answered Mesha, with ready assent. "Thou hast spoken boldly and with truth that which the soldiers of my lord Holofernes have feared, but desired, to speak."

Mesha knew not the aim of Nin-Gul, but he did know the rewards of agreeing; hence his prompt and overwhelming second.

Holofernes, his face lined, his eyes blank from thought, leaned against the back of the nimedu a long time without speaking.

From their places in front the man and woman watched him, Mesha curiously, Nin-Gul with tense, eager impatience. At last the Tartan discharged his thoughts in slow, judicious sentences.

"With the declining of the sun to-morrow, which will be the fifth day since the seizing of the secret spring by Achior, thou, Mesha, under cover of the archers' flights, shalt lead the heavy men against the gate and over the walls of the city. And see that thou failest not, for if thou art beaten back"—he added it with brutal menace—"then from the point of a spear tied in the highest tree thy solitary head shall behold me do it later."

Mesha rose to bow his thanks. "I shall not be beaten back alive, my lord," he said.

Holofernes laughed. "Nay, I care not for thy life; it is the city I desire," he said, frankly. Next turning to Nin-Gul: "And thy words, Nin-Gul, have made me to think much, yet pleased me. The thoughts of my friends need not be troubled henceforth because of me. I shall not bring shame upon the Assyrians by my laxness. Thou shalt this moment go to the Hebrew woman

and in my name invite her to my tent. Then you and Mesha, she and I, will all be merry with much wine. After that go thou to thy old tent with Mesha, for from henceforth Judith of the Hebrews abideth here."

As Nin-Gul started to go, Holofernes checked her.

"Wait but a moment," he said; "thou art such a good friend to this Hebrew woman that I fear in thine eagerness to tell the good news, Nin-Gul, thou mayst forget or twist part of the message. Let the eunuch go with thee, so that, carried by two, and neither a man, the message may go straight."

Judith received the summons with her usual air of quiet dignity that overawed talk.

"Say to my lord that his handmaid cometh," she said to the eunuch, and turned her back on Nin-Gul completely so that the Assyrian woman, moved by some hidden force, she knew not what, felt compelled, raging inwardly all the while, to follow the eunuch from the tent. She had thought that Judith would refuse so plain a demand.

But for all her dignified calmness, behind the mask of ice the heart of the woman of

Bethulia was beating wildly. Her nerves were straining almost to the breaking-point, for she felt that the opportunity was at hand, the decisive moment had almost arrived. She darted to the entrance of the tent to look towards Bethulia. The heavy clouds hung low. A driving mist, almost a rain, hid everything from sight. But somewhere over in that mist she knew that Achior with the guard of Judith waited—waited low, anxiously, for her and for Holofernes. Now she turned quickly back into the tent again.

"Sarah, my black robe, my anklets, my bracelets, the golden collar and the chains—all, all, Sarah, for to-night I must be beautiful, beautiful beyond the dreams of men!" She cried it almost wildly in her excitement, while with knowing tact and deft fingers the little maid busied herself at her easy task. Soon Judith was ready. She stood with the burnished mirror in her hands, while Sarah, behind, held a torch to light up the glory of her hair.

"Ah," whispered the woman, "thinkest thou I be lovely enough, Sarah, for Achior to

fight for, for Holofernes to die for?" And with a change of tone; "Come now, quick, the cloak; and do thou, shrouded likewise, wait just without the tent of Holofernes."

"And thou sayest"—the Tartan was beginning. But he got no further, for Judith, attired just as she was on her first coming into the camp, stood before him. She dropped the shrouding cloak, and, as he had done the first night, Holofernes started forward. Only now he did not drop back into the seat again, but called to his servants:

"Away with the nimedu. Bring forward my couch, that the most exceeding beautiful of all women may sit beside me."

The eunuchs quickly put the throne-chair aside and drew forward the couch.

"Come," he said to her; "sit down and be merry, for thou hast found favor before me."

Judith came forward to his side eagerly. "Who am I," she murmured in his ear, "that I should gainsay thee, my lord? I will drink, because this day my life is magnified above all my days."

"Had all thy people chosen wisely as thou

hast," he said, kindly, "they would not now be but waiting—food for swords!"

"They put their trust in God," she said. "But they had sinned."

"Their God!" he sneered—"their excuse for all their failures."

Now Holofernes turned and looked into the eyes that answered back only passionate love to his. He drew a long breath and turned to Mesha.

"Nay, I have changed my mind for the feast, Mesha. It were more compliment, as well as more lover-like, to eat and drink with Judith alone. The tent which once was Nin-Gul's is hers again, Mesha, and thine. Judith will wait here. And then thou, Mesha, hadst best not drink too much because of thy leading the attack to-morrow."

The Hebrew woman pretended to fix her hair that she might hide the burning shame in her face. She moved so as to feel more firmly the hard butt of Achior's dagger nestling between her breasts, and it comforted her. She looked up for one last shot at the departing Nin-Gul.

"I hope, sweet Nin-Gul, both thou and

this man will have better fortune than the last one who tried to play the lover in that tent." The tone was honey with sharp death in it.

"Which one?" sneered Nin-Gul, with bitter meaning.

"Nay," answered the sweet voice of the Hebrew woman. "Thou shouldst know best. There was but one, dead Jazen. Thou wast there just before he came, and the others arrived almost with his death."

Holofernes laughed aloud, and as the dropping entrance-curtain shut off the others, turned and threw his arms vehemently about Judith. Like a wild young tigress she twisted out from under his clasp, and sprang away from him.

"Not yet, not yet, my lord!" she cried.

Both were panting hard and from different causes. He started towards her, but she backed away from him. "My lord!" He paused at her tone. "I could not bear," she half sobbed, "that on this, the occasion when I finally give in to thee and thy desire, that—that all should know my shame."

She ended with a rush, and paused, her

bosom panting, her cheeks dyed red, her eyes big, misty, luminous, gazing into his. Holofernes looked at her, a dancing mist blurring his sight.

"Of all the women I ever saw," he cried, "thou art the most to be desired. Thou shalt have thy way."

He called the guard. A grizzled veteran entered and gazed reproachfully at Judith.

"Clear the top!" cried Holofernes. "Let only Mesha, Nin-Gul, and ourselves be here. Put guards at the foot of the path and let no one for any cause come up. This is the night of Love!" He ended it with a great laugh, tossing off a cup of wine from the great bowl that stood always full in one corner of the tent.

"Another, my lord, and I will drink with thee!" cried Judith, and they drank to each other and to Love, once, twice, half a score of times, he deeply, she over her shoulder.

Now they were sitting side by side upon the couch. He drew her, resisting just so much as to excite desire, close to him. She braced herself back, her hands against his chest, and beneath those little hands his

great muscles, hot and forceful, sprang out writhing and twisting over one another, as his arms, fast about her waist, came forward. Her arms gave way. She was against him. She bent her head forward upon her knees, sobbing violently.

"My lord! My prince! My king! But one, one more request ere I give myself to thee!"

"Speak!" panted Holofernes.

She rushed it off as fast as possible. "My people come of the Chaldees, my lord, and have lived in the desert. They have learned the custom whereby the man must capture the woman for wife. Wilt thou not capture me, my lord? Let us steal forth as lovers, then, to the edge of the camp. Then I start —thou catchest me, and we come back to love. Wilt thou not, my lord?" All the pent-up anxiety of the great game was in that final whispered plea.

Holofernes burst out laughing. "Chance losing thee when I have thee fast in the midst of my soldiers!" he cried. "That is not the Assyrian way. But I would humor thee. The hunt shall be in this tent. I will

give thee that much freedom. We shall play it in thy way. But, first, let me have kisses, as a hound, to give me taste for the chase!" By main force he lifted her shrinking, cringing form against him. The warmth of her body stole into his blood, setting it afire. With great gasps he breathed in the smell of her hair. The frightened moisture of her eyes, the dewy softness of her lips, made the wild blood dance wilder ideas over the clouds of his imagination.

"Be fair, my lord! Be fair!" she sobbed. "One more draught before the chase!"

They drank again and for the last time, he deeply, she over her shoulder. And as they turned away from the bowl the woman sobbed low to herself:

"O Father, thou knowest. Forgive me! Forgive me!"

"Quickly! Quickly!" cried Holofernes. And the chase was on. Twice around the tent they went, his hot desire at every step gaining on her wild-footed fear. Desperately she dodged to the centre and only the couch was between them. Like a wild animal he leaped the obstacle and seized her in his arms.

She shrank in with a gasping cry of utter despair.

"I have thee! I have thee!" The sound came forth from his lips exultingly, with labored sobs. Her cringing body was against his, his hot lips tore long kisses from hers. He was crushing her to him, his jumping blood as fire making lurid pictures in the mad-house of his brain. And all this while, dodging, twisting, writhing in her despairing strength, she fought against him. Suddenly he seemed to triumph. They were beside the couch. They fell.

"O Father!" Her hand crept upward to her bosom. The knife of Achior stole stealthily from its hiding-place between her breasts. There came a quick, gurgling cry, a series of short gaspings, and, rolling from beside him, she lay upon the ground, her arms and bosom covered with the hot red blood that burned her as does fire.

"Sarah!"

The waiting-maid came quickly, only to start back aghast at what she saw. A bloody, hysterical mad-woman shook the frightened maid into sense.

"Quick! Get thou out as though to pray for thy mistress's sins. Go to the pass. Thou wilt there find Achior. Say to him his dagger hath revenged him. Holofernes is dead. Say to him I must stay to avert suspicion for the time. I await him here. Let him do as he thinketh best. But Bethulia is saved!"

She ended it with a little hysterical cry of triumph as she pushed Sarah from the tent. Then, turning, she went back to the couch and stood looking down, fearful, fascinated at the work her hands had done.

XVIII



ROWDED back behind the great gate, packed in the narrow way that led to it, extending clear over the fountain and around the public square of Bethulia, a long serpent of armed men stayed waiting. And the scales of this serpent were brassy shields, while above each scale glowed two eyes—sunken eyes, wild, glowering eyes, eyes of demons rather than of men. Now and then the long body seemed to writhe and twist within itself as some of its component parts shifted, moving about under the strain of the waiting. But each movement, met always by whispered command, "Be still!" quickly ceased. And along the sides of the line ran boys with cups and fast-emptying water-skins, giving to each fighting-man some of the last water from the fountain of

Judith. And over all, pervading all, borne along on the air of strained, stilled excitement, there sounded the gentle melody that soldiers love, the breathing of men, the infrequent whispers, the faint shuffling of restless feet on hard ground, the rubbing of harness, with now and then a punctuating clash as some careless soldier let steel strike steel. And in sharp contrast to the stilled noise of the fighting-line there was another sound, a steady hum of low-pitched voices, for in the public square beside the fountain the women and the old men knelt in prayer.

"O Lord, deliver us not into the hands of our enemies!"

"Hear Thou our prayers, O Lord!"

"Make Thou strong the arms of our fighting-men!"

"Put not a reproach upon us, that the Gentiles may say, 'Where is your God?'"

The low hum of the prayer rose up into the black night, to be caught in the eternal vastness and hurried on above.

The gentle Ozias, his hands extended in blessing, stood a moment above the praying

ones, then moved along the line to encourage the soldiers. With him was Enan, the huge commander of the forces, terrible in his war panoply. Now and then Ozias stopped along the line to speak to a particular soldier. Perhaps it was: "Thou art too young, my son, for such work."

"Wouldst thou not do better with a smaller shield? Thou seemest weak."

"Have you had water here?"

But always to every question the answer came, in the same tenor, "Father, we are prepared."

"And the guard of Judith, Achior's men, are they in place?" asked Ozias.

"Yea," replied Enan. "They slipped over the wall an hour since. We let them from the city wall by ropes to the edge of the cliff. Each man save Achior went gagged, so that even should he fall in scrambling down the perpendicular rocks to the foot of the pass, he might not by crying out alarm the Assyrians."

"'Tis well," said Ozias. "Achior will not fail!"

"Achior will not fail! Thou hast great

faith in this Ammonite." Enan spoke with just a trace of bitterness.

"Yea," replied Ozias, calmly. "The Lord hath sent him, through Judith, to be His instrument in the saving of the city."

"Yea," murmured Enan, "it is a desperate trial. Even though they should not take Holofernes, yet must we fight, for the water is all gone."

"Yea," answered Ozias, sadly, "the will of the Lord hath become plain. We must fight."

And while this was going on above, down at the foot of the pass, crouching behind the rocks, within the circle of the camp noise—nay, almost within javelin's-throw of the Assyrian sentries—the guard of Judith lay waiting. Four hundred and ninety-five men there were, for five of them, tight-gagged, had fallen to death with little noise in that desperate night-climb down the crags. Achior and Joseph, the leaders, lay far apart, Joseph at the upper, Achior at the lower end of the line. Above them was the city, silent, watchful, waiting to hurl forth its armed men. Beneath them stretched the huge, confident,

unsuspecting camp, while in the very centre of it on the high place shone dimly through the heavy mist their beacon, the highest tent of Holofernes.

Gradually the camp grew still. Then, lying there, helpless, unable to do aught, Achior saw blazing torches borne about the little hill-top. A friendly wind lifted the mist a little and he saw a muffled figure enter the tent of Holofernes. Then other figures came out. The lights from the big tent grew dim. Evidently all but one torch had been put out. Again the curtain of mist rolled down. And with twitching hands and aching heart the commander of Judith's guard lay there behind the rocks—waiting.

An hour passed, and more. In the black, still night, the nearest sentry shocked the stiff, strained men by his sudden challenge. With arrows on the string, the two best marksmen placed nearest the camp waited. Then, clearly borne on the moist air, the voice of a woman further startled the watchers.

"Nay, it is but Sarah, handmaid to Judith, the Hebrew woman, and I am come forth to pray for my mistress's sins."

"What hath she done?" laughed the Assyrian.

"She lieth in the tent of thy lord Holofernes, and hath given herself unto him."

The man lying next to Achior writhed with pain at the sudden grip of the chief upon his arm. The sentry was laughing: "If that be so," he said, "go thou out to pray thanks to thy God for the honor done thy mistress, and, returning, wait thou here with me awhile." And he turned back to the other end of his post, humming a little Assyrian love-chant. The woman, released, went on straight for the blackness of the pass.

"Sarah!"

The low whisper of Achior drew her right. He pulled her down on the ground out of sight behind the rock.

"Tell me," he whispered.

The woman, now that the great danger of the Assyrian camp was passed, trembled all over. At last she could speak.

"My mistress awaiteth thee, my lord, in the tent of Holofernes. Holofernes lieth dead."

"Dead!" It was a low, excited murmur that Achior sternly hushed into silence.

"And—and—" he whispered, anxiously, unable to speak his thoughts.

Sarah broke down, sobbing quietly. "I know naught, my lord, save that she said unto me, 'Tell Achior that his dagger hath revenged him. For what Holofernes hath done unto me, I slew him.' And—and—"

"Well?" gasped Achior.

"And, my lord, her bosom was covered with his blood!"

Achior groaned, for the moment overcome. Then his stern, soldier spirit rallied. Turning his head, he whispered to Joseph, who had crawled up, "Holofernes is dead. Judith hath slain him. But we must have a heavy-bearded head to represent him as our standard. Woman, hath that Assyrian who stopped thee a beard?"

"Yea, my lord, heavy and black it seemed."

Achior just touched Joseph's arm, and then, with the young captain following, crawled carefully down into the plain.

A few minutes later the two men crouched beside the noiselessly sped guard. The older man was whispering to the younger: "Take thou his head, Joseph, and put it upon

a spear. Give me another hour to get safely in; then climb the pass again, and, with the head in front as thy standard, charge boldly upon the Assyrians about the city, with the war-cry, 'Holofernes is dead!' When thou hast triumphed, as thou must do from their fright and sickness, light the beacon on the city wall, and with all the fighting-men save a few to guard the pass above, charge boldly down upon the whole Assyrian army with every man of thy force crying aloud, 'Holofernes is dead!' I shall hold that little hill—keep Judith safe—until thou hast fought thy way to me."

And with a last farewell Achior turned away, to be quickly lost in the dangerous darkness of the camp.

For a time the flickering torches, quite unnoticed, cast grotesque shadows about the body of the dead man and the woman standing beside it, quite as still. At last, with a little shuddering sigh of realizing horror, she raised her eyes. A cry escaped her, for there on the wall of the tent she saw herself, herself and It done together in shadow-

picture by the torch behind her back. She started sidewise like a suddenly frightened horse. The wavering giantess on the wall before her jumped in answer. And It—It moved. She whirled around, and from another angle by another torch she saw herself and It in a new position, and now the grotesquely extended arm that reached with limp, drooped hand beyond the couch seemed to be clasping the wavering giantess somewhere about the knees. The body of the living woman went cold. She stepped, stepped wrong, and the dead arm touched her; worse still, the arm gave, and then, with that rebounding sponginess of the dead not yet completely stiff, pressed back against her. She leaped back from it, and the dead hand, wobbling over the edge of the couch, seemed to wave her a gentle farewell that on the walls of the tent a dozen shadows in all manner of postures exaggerated with horrible grotesqueness.

Shaking in every limb, the woman hurried to the sides of the tent to tear down from their brackets and beat out upon the ground the torches, one by one. At the last she

paused. No, no, she must leave one, for she could not stay in the dark alone with It. The smoke from the extinguished torches of sweet-scented wood rose in thin columns of incense, and meeting above formed a fragrant cloud that, dropping low and being shot with many colors by the single torch, seemed a shrouding canopy of ever-varying, ever-exquisite design above the dead man.

Flat upon his back, for so he had writhed to die, his mouth just open as though in expostulation, his eyes, dim caverns of reproach, staring straight upward, his limbs tossed carelessly, lay what had been the great Tartan of the greatest King. And she who feared him living not at all, now fearfully, tremblingly crept to his side, dead. She saw the hilt of Achior's dagger still sticking out through the matted beard. Some one might come. It might be necessary to do another murder. She must have that knife. She caught it, pulled at it, and the head wrenched slowly towards her with the sound of gurgling blood.

When she came to her senses she was lying

on the ground beside the couch, holding the knife, and the horrid head with the wet, soggy beard was hanging over the couch looking down at her. She fainted again, and when she came to a second time she lay on the ground and cried and prayed until she was able to creep noiselessly out of range of those sightless eyes that seemed to follow her almost every way she turned. She feared to breathe naturally for danger of disturbing the dead man. Each moment she feared to hear voiced the question which the eyes seemed steadily asking: "Why hast thou done this, Judith?"

With a start she remembered Achior. In her excitement and haste she had forgotten to tell Sarah to drop the rope. He had no way of getting up. She must be alone with that dead horror against which the knife she held was no protection and neither light nor darkness a relief. But could she leave It and come back again? She hoped that It might not mind nor even notice. Stealthily she sneaked around so as to get behind It. She crept towards the door, expecting each instant to have the Horror grip her shoulders,

to hear a sepulchral, blood-choked voice sputter, "Where goest thou, Judith?"

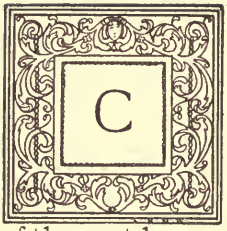
At the entrance-curtain she sneaked a look over her shoulder. It lay still, the position unchanged, the head from her. With a gasp she slipped past the curtain, and the reviving slap of the chilly night-mist in her face brought her partly to her senses.

Crouching so as not by any chance to be seen from below against the sky-line, she hurried towards Nin-Gul's tent. She slipped around behind it. Now she had found the stone. She heard the voice of Mesha, low-pitched, at hoarse love-making, and the purring replies of Nin-Gul. How good the human tones of her human enemies sounded! Even after the rope had been carefully lowered, she lingered to bask in the feeling of human companionship. But then she must go back to It. Some one might come. Slowly she forced her laggard steps to the big tent. At the entrance she listened a long time. There was no sound within. She stepped past the bar. The torch burned dimly. The low canopy of light-shot smoke still hung above the body. Overcome, she

crouched in a corner near the entrance, afraid before the speechless majesty of Death.

There was a slight noise without. The curtain was jerked aside. In another moment Achior, the Ammonite, standing between the winged bulls of brass, before the dead Holofernes, was stopping with his kisses the convulsive sobbings of the woman.

XIX



LINGING about the neck of her lover, enclosed safe within his arms, her lips seeking his, Judith gradually washed away with gentle tears the fear and horror of the past hour. Now from her safe vantage-point she looked about the tent. After all, it was a simple tent, containing nothing unusual save the helpless dead body of a man she had loathed. And the friendly, flickering torch cast such foolish shadows. She almost laughed.

Happily she turned her face back to Achior's. For the first time she saw the hard, deep lines of anxious grief. Her eyes stole up timidly, fearfully seeking his, and in them she read the agonized question his lips would not ask.

Her breath caught with a little half sob.

She gripped his big shoulders and shook at them to make him understand the sooner.

"Nay, nay!" she cried. "Thy dagger saved me."

He caught her to him with such sudden force that in sharp pain she felt her flesh bruise against his breast-plate.

"Thy God — and henceforth mine — be praised!" he murmured.

Then, shuddering, she dragged him over to the couch.

"I tried, I tried hard," she whispered; "but he would not. He played the game in here. He leaped the couch and seized upon me. We fell together and—and see thou where I thrust thy dagger."

And she pointed out the great gash in the black beard through which Achior's knife had reached down deep in the thick throat towards the heart of Holofernes.

"Dost thou remember," she whispered, woman-like, "the last time that we three were in the tent, when thou wast dragged forth to Bethulia and I was left to plot and plan alone?"

"Yea, I remember," answered Achior,

abstractedly, for, manlike, his mind dwelt little on such thoughts. Rather, it was busy with the immediate present and the far more important near future.

Judith understood this mood.

"I grieve that I should have spoiled thy plan," she said, low.

"Nay, the plan hath not far miscarried," he hastened to answer, smiling. "We seized upon another black-bearded head. It will do quite as well, for the voice of Holofernes is stilled. In the darkness and terror of the night attack none can halt to look clearly at the bloody features of our head, and none will get near enough to the standard-bearer to distinguish for sure."

"Then all goes well."

He smiled upon her tenderly. "Nay, thou art still within the camp. All is not well until thou standest safe upon the low roof of thy house watching the flowing fountain in the square of Bethulia."

"And thou beside me," she whispered, low, with hanging head.

A noise, so uncertain it might have been the rustling of the leaves in distant trees

between two puffs of wind, so faint it could scarce have reached another yard, caught the quick ear of Achior.

"Joseph with the guard of Judith is up the pass," he whispered, and with quick, noiseless steps glided to the other side of the tent to make his preparation for defence.

Now the tent of Holofernes faced sidewise to Bethulia, and the entrance was just at the top of the little path leading up from the plain below. This was according to the desire of the Tartan, that with the curtain of his tent open he might see every one who came upon the top. It could not have been arranged better for Achior's plan.

The way along which men must come singly led up between two giant rocks that jutted out almost from the entrance of the tent, and just within, to the right and left of the entrance, placed broadside to the path, stood the two winged bulls of brass, behind one of which both the man and woman could easily hide. The preparations for defence were simple. There was but one approach. Achior had to hold that pass. A great war-bow with a sheaf of arrows

beside it hung from a pole at one corner of the tent. He took these down and laid them on the ground behind the bull on the right. The war-spear of Holofernes, his shield, his javelin, and his sword were placed there also. Then the Ammonite brought out the armor of the dead Tartan.

"When the fighting hath begun, I shall put it upon thee," he said to Judith.

"Nay," she protested, for she could not bear the thought of touching anything that Holofernes had worn.

"Thou shalt do as I command," retorted Achior. "Thinkest thou I give my life for a dead woman?"

And Judith was silent before the one man who could make her obey.

By this time the rustling noise towards the mountains had changed to one more sinister. It was a faint murmuring that rose and fell with sharp punctuations. It might have been the wind going through the forest at a distance and ripping off the branches of the trees. Only no such small breeze as blew that night could have made that sound.

"They have attacked," murmured Achior.

There came a louder roar.

"The gates have opened now."

He stepped to the side of the tent towards Bethulia. "Let us see what we can."

"But, Mesha?" questioned Judith. "What of him?"

"Is he not below?" asked Achior.

"Nay, he and Nin-Gul are in her old tent."

"Then, this way."

He crushed the torch beneath his heel, and leaving the dead leader in the dark tent alone, they crept without, where, standing in the shadow, they could watch both for movement in the struggle to the right and the narrow pass, soon to be their private fighting-ground.

A faint glow hung in the sky above Bethulia. Evidently the city was lighted up, and from beyond the lights there came that indefinable but ever increasing, ever more terrible noise. Then, suddenly, from behind the clouds the horror-stricken moon rushed forth to view the carnage. The small breeze, which had with difficulty borne off the sound sidewise, died from its vain effort. And over the sleeping army

there burst at once the noise of the battle. The rattling roar of distant cheers that rose and fell, the monotonous clash and clang of striking weapons that rang unceasingly, the shrieks of dying men, the curses of the living, and, in strange medley with those curses, the names of gods beyond the telling —all were mixed and rolled in one conglomerate horrible alarm that, whirling down from the mountain-top, shook at the heart of each sleeping soldier, crying, "Awake to die!"

And the man and woman, who had listened with augmenting hearts to that sound from its borning as the rustling of breeze-stirred leaves, through its growth into the wild cry of the distant whirlwind in the forest, on to its present consummation of this roaring, shrieking, blaring clang of death, stood side by side upon the edge of the little hill watching the camp awake.

About, on all sides, the plain stirred restlessly. They could hear the excited talk of the guards below wondering what had happened. Now, by all the gods, they were cursing, for they thought that those on the heights above had stormed the city, cutting

all of the men below from a share of the spoils. All over the plain, now showing clear in the moonlight, soldiers were standing up looking towards Bethulia. The guard discussed whether or not the Tartan should be told. One, a grizzled veteran, was about to start up the narrow path when Jair, the young officer, ordered him back.

"Thou fool, stand! Thinkest thou to disturb the Tartan with the Hebrew woman! Nay, he hath ordered it, and is taking the city and the woman in the same night."

The grizzled veteran came back obedient enough, but muttering to himself. "I see no flying torches, no blazing arrows, no fighting on the wall. 'Tis no attack to me."

Now Judith, crouching on the rock above, touched the arm of the man beside her. Something was stirring in the tent of Nin-Gul. Silently the man and woman without stole back into the tent of the dead Tartan.

"Get thou beside the couch to coax him in," whispered the Ammonite. Shuddering, but obedient, the woman crept that way. Achior, bending low, took his place behind

the brazen bull beside the weapons of Holofernes.

There was the sound of some one coming from the tent of Mesha. There was a pause, then the sharp exclamation, "'Tis no assault! They have attacked from out the city!"

A man's steps came leaping to the tent of Holofernes, and the voice of Mesha at the entrance cried:

"Awake, my lord, awake!—the mice of the hills have come forth from the holes! Thy soldiers wait to be led against them!"

There was no reply, and Mesha, stepping within the entrance-curtain that he might be heard the better, called, now impatiently, "Awake, my lord, awake! Thy soldiers wait on thee!"

He could see nothing, but from the direction of the couch a woman, yawning as from slumber, answered him: "What wishest thou, Mesha? My lord Holofernes, lying beside me, sleepeth."

"Then awaken him quickly. The Bethulians have come out of their cage. His soldiers await the Tartan. Hearest thou that?" the Moab cried.

The roar from the hills had become louder, and now it was mingled with the excited murmurings of the disturbed camp.

The voice in turn, all excitement, cried again:

"Nay, Mesha, he lieth heavy with wine. I cannot stir him. Come thou and try."

The Moabite soldier blundered straight ahead in the darkness until he stumbled against the couch.

He reached over and shook his leader. He shook him twice. There was no responding movement of the prostrate body. It was stiffly cold. A chilly horror crept along the back of Mesha to settle with icy weight about his heart.

"Judith," he whispered, but she answered not. The tent was quiet, deadly quiet, in grewsome contrast to the roar without. Mesha's hands stole towards the head of the couch, feeling along the body of Holofernes. They touched the beard, that wet, torn beard, and then they found the gaping gash in the throat beneath. A moment of dull horror numbed him, then wild anger and

great grief held sway. A sickening cry burst from the soldier:

"My lord lieth dead! He hath been slain!"

And from the darkness over to one side of the tent, a woman's voice, clear, satirical, mocked him.

"He hath been slain. Yea, Mesha, I, Judith of the Hebrews, slew him."

"Then, thou harlot—" He got no further. A grip such as the Moab had never known before fell upon him. He struggled and fought, and tried to cry out for the guard, but a fearful blow upon his mouth crushed in the teeth so that he could scarcely sputter.

The figure that held him made no sound. Only from the darkness where he had heard the voice of Judith there now came chilling, half-hysterical laughter. And to the sound of the mocking laughter he and the thing that held him fought on in the grewsome dark. They fought around the tent and then across. Minutes passed in terrible wrestling for opportunity to use a dagger. But still the other man made no sound. Rather, he fought on with the same amount of strength, that did not seem to increase nor to slacken,

but always to just hold Mesha safe, and from wondering the Moab began to fear a little.

The struggling figures knocked hard against the couch. Then, still fighting, they fell upon it.

It was empty.

And Mesha knew he was locked with a dead man. In the sudden relaxation of the horrid thought, he felt a knife just graze his throat, and instantly there flashed to his tortured mind the old story that a great king dead must have a courier to precede him over the river Datilla and announce him properly at the court of Queen Allat.

Now he felt blood dripping on his face from the thing above him. And he seemed to see the torn, wet beard and the gaping throat of the dead leader.

With the sudden strength of utter terror he threw the "thing" clean from the couch. Then he leaped up, his sword out, cutting wildly about him and backing always towards the entrance.

The whirling, hacking sword met another

that held it hard, and by the fire of the long sparks that flew from that grinding contact Mesha made out dimly the helmet of Holofernes.

He faltered, and something terrible crashed down through guard and helm alike. A glaring light, that showed him nothing, flashed quick before his eyes and was as quickly gone. He was on his knees. Now he was up once more, fighting desperately. But all the while, cramping his courage, gripping his heart, was that terrible, supernatural fear. His beating brain remembered having heard that the dead sometimes spoke, but then Holofernes was cut in the throat so that he could not. He felt his legs growing weaker. His heart was shutting up, leaving all the blood in his eyes. Again and again that merciless sword beat down. He felt himself sinking, falling, dying. The noise of rushing water sounded in his ears.

"Datilla, I go—Holofernes, I go."

Into the heavy silence that followed, the voice of Achior cut like a keen knife.

"Get thou, Judith, quickly to the tent of Nin-Gul. Should the Assyrian woman stop

thee, stab her, but bring the torch. I think in the struggle the body of Holofernes was knocked from the couch, and my face was barely scratched."

XX

"AND Nin-Gul was not there?"

"Nay, the tent stood empty."

"'Tis good and bad. Under the noise of the fight she must have slipped down the path to warn the guard. We will have them soon."

And Achior did not think to look behind the tent of Holofernes, where, crouching low to the ground, a woman strained her ears to make out the low tones of the speakers and what was going forward in the tent.

Absorbed in his desperate final reckoning with Mesha, the Ammonite for the time had forgotten completely the distant battle raging about the city on the mountain-top. And, of course, Judith, while the life of her lover hung perilled, paid no attention, either.

But now, by the light of the torch, which she had brought from the deserted tent of

Nin-Gul, the man and woman stood each to the eyes of the other, plainly wondering what had occurred. For the noise, which but a short time had sounded a clashing roar, now came to their ears so faint as scarce to be heard above the confused murmuring of the disturbed camp. Anxiously they rushed without to look towards Bethulia. The eager moon, big and bright, set forth plainly the mountain and the city cresting it. On the plain between the mountain and the little hill were thousands of soldiers looking up towards the crags and jumping about with wild, excited gesticulations that the moonlight made the more grotesque. Then Achior and Judith saw, too, what was the matter. Across the face of the cliffs, now glaring white in the moonlight, clear from Achior's Pass to the city wall, there rained down at irregular intervals, by scores and hundreds, funny-shaped black shadows.

"Assyrian bodies," murmured Achior. "The Bethulians have won."

And even as he said it, from the top of the city wall burst forth, bright, glorious, the beacon of victory.

The roar of rage that greeted it from the camp drowned out completely the cheers on the distant top.

The hearts of Achior and Judith beat joyously, but such was no time for unmingled rejoicing. Beacons of victory might become for them too easily signals of death.

"An answer," cried Achior, 'that they may know we live."

The tent of Holofernes was heavy felt, that would not burn, but Nin-Gul's and the extra tent which had been squeezed in were woven stuff, and lighter. The man darted into the tent of Holofernes and came out with the torch. Another instant and the light fabric of the two small tents, blazing high in the air, sent forth its brave signal to the watchers on the wall of the city.

A mighty cry of alarm went up from the thousands packed about the little hill. "Holofernes! Holofernes! Come forth, Holofernes!"

For the first time Judith noticed that Achior was wearing the helmet of the dead Tartan. Then she saw his face where it had been gashed in the struggle with Mesha. He

put aside her anxious question with an impatient wave of his hand. Wounds other than disabling were of too small moment even for discussion in that hour of wild excitement. Peeping over the edge of the rock, the Ammonite saw soldiers scrambling up the narrow path. Then thrice the great war-bow of Holofernes twanged and three dead spearsmen blocked the way. The others ran back to join the rest of the guard at the bottom of the hill.

Achior spoke sharply to Judith: "Watch here!" And he was gone into the tent. A moment later he came out wiping his sword and muttering, "The guard of Judith fights under the head of Holofernes. Our body must have none."

And now anger mingled with entreaty in the cries of the soldiers pressing in ever closer about the bottom of the hill. They yelled for Holofernes to come forth to lead them against the city. They screamed to know if Mesha was dying in the burning tents, and, above all, they shrieked curses against the Hebrew woman who kept their Tartan from the battle. As yet they had

heard nothing. They had seen no one on the hill-top. Its only sign of life vouchsafed had been the arrows which the guard supposed Holofernes, irritated at being disturbed with his mistress, had sent as bloody warning. It was in keeping with his general conduct.

Achior went again into the big tent to stagger forth a moment later bearing in his arms a bloody, headless trunk. He moved around the hill away from the big tent and the narrow path until he reached a point where below him the jagged rocks stood up hard and sharp, breakers holding back the human sea that surged and moaned and shrieked about the rock island. There, at the very edge, set forth plainly by the firelight, the Ammonite stood, a giant figure, holding in plain view the bloody trunk of Holofernes. A recognizing voice in the crowd cried out: "'Tis Achior, Achior the traitor!" And thousands of angry voices took up the chorus: "Achior the traitor! What dost thou here, Achior? Where is Holofernes?"

The wave of anger that swept in over the

human sea dashed high its dirty spray of blasphemous insult at the lone figure upon the little cliff above. In every tongue of the then known world and by every god that any tongue had ever known they cursed him. And the man above apparently paid no heed, only he watched carefully for the arrows that might fly at any moment. At last the crowd's breath went and the list of gods ran out. The encircling soldiers subsided into surly, dangerous stillness.

Then in turn the man standing there above them sent forth his voice, deep, powerful, far out over the plain.

"The army is undone. Holofernes, your Tartan, is dead, slain this night by the Hebrew woman, who did escape into the city with his head. The Bethulians, under that black beard as their standard, have cut and slain your comrades on the heights above. You all saw them falling from the cliffs. The city is saved. Even now, strong in their power and their God, these Bethulians come against you, ye dogs chosen for destruction. Ye have called for your leader. Ye shall have him. See, down the pass they bring

you his bloody head, with thousands of victorious spears behind it. And here, that you may have him all, I give you his body. Take it."

And, laughing, the Ammonite hurled down at the upturned faces the bloody trunk of Holofernes. A moment there was absolute stillness. Then into that fearful, grim calm a woman's shriek, high, piercing, terrible in its utter misery, rang out to chill all listening hearts. And Nin-Gul darted forward from behind the tent of Holofernes where she had been hiding. A moment the thousands of watching men saw that white face showing still whiter against the raven hair, saw those burning eyes set wide in hopeless grief. Then she cast herself outward and died on the jagged rocks beneath, just touching the headless body of her lord.

And even as she fell there rolled over from the direction of the pass the concerted roar of thousands of voices: "Death to the Assyrians! Holofernes is dead!"

The Bethulians had attacked.

Upon the top of the little hill Achior fell flat upon his face. As he touched the ground

a dozen whistling, darting winged deaths passed over the spot where he had stood. And far over towards the pass half a dozen soldiers of those turning that way to fight the Bethulians were struck through the back by arrows. Instantly from that part of the field the cry went up: "We are attacked on all sides!" And some of the soldiers faced about to shoot in the direction from which the arrows had come.

There was no leader big enough to quell the riot. The under-officers were powerless, for the men had reached that stage of raging panic that knows no control. Those close to the hill began to shoot at the top of it.

Achior realizing the chance which some reckless archer's folly had given him, managed after some effort to prop up the body of dead Mesha for a target. Soon Mesha carried almost as many feathers as any bird, while fighting men farther out in camp were falling under feathered deaths that struck them down from all directions.

And the panic spread.

Unofficered soldiers at such a time are as sheep, wild and senseless. The leader was

dead and the under-officers could do nothing, for at their first word of protest to the mob many fell slain by their own men. It was becoming an orgy of blood in which every man's weapon was turned against his neighbor, while all the time from the Bethulian side the guard of Judith, the point of Enan's death-wedge, was sinking steadily deeper towards the heart of the yielding Assyrian army. Few of those Hebrews died, but many, weakened by hunger, fell from the exhaustion of killing.

Out in the very front of them, as became great leaders, Enan and Joseph strove side by side. Enan, the raging bull, tore a wide road for himself through the enemy, knocking his victims to one side or the other with terrible blows. Joseph, the keen swordsman, went along a straight line marked behind him by dead men. And the soldiers of the leaders fought according to their various humors, but all desperately. Even Benjamin, the tailor, ripped his spear with reckless skill through good Assyrian garments, laughing all the time wildly at each red, gaping seam.

But what of Judith and Achior upon the hill-top? Theirs was no simple task of easy killing. Mesha's Moab guard was disciplined and strong, and undisturbed by thought of possible defeat. Likewise those soldiers had a personal grudge to settle, for after the dead body of Mesha had stayed up a while, they recognized the well-feathered figure.

Now they began to shoot their arrows into the air that they might fall straight down upon the top of the little hill. Achior made Judith crawl under between the legs of one of the brazen bulls, where, protected by the body above, with the wings on either side, she was absolutely safe. For himself, he dragged the couch of Holofernes across the top of the narrow path, and, lying beneath it, waited in safety with plenty of room to use his war-bow when the rush began.

Once a head appeared above the edge of the cliff on the other side. Judith screamed to Achior. He whirled that way and the head disappeared, an arrow through it. Then Achior darted across through the swift, down-sifting deaths to cut with one blow of the sword the rope which Nin-Gul had

found and let down for her own escape. The rope popped loud, and two men who had almost reached the top piled up in a mixed heap dead on the rocks.

Now the rush up the path began. They came up in single line, crouching low and holding their shields before them. But the great war-bow kept up a constant twanging until there piled up in the narrow path, breast high, a hot, white barrier of mangled Moabs.

Now all the arrows were gone.

A grizzled veteran climbed over the barrier of dead and rushed straight up the narrow path. The Ammonite recognized an old friend.

"Stand back, man of Melothus!" the defender cried, but the veteran only shouted back "Traitor!" and rushed straight on to die upon the spear of Achior.

Then the blood lust with mighty savagery seized upon the Ammonite. He would not wait for his enemies to approach the top, but rushing twenty feet down the path, took his place at the outer entrance of the two huge rocks behind the barricade of bodies to

hack and hew and mangle all who appeared. At last he sat down to weep, disconsolate, for the Moabites would no longer try the pass.

The Hebrew death-wedge had sunk in until it reached and pierced the heart of the Assyrian army. Without the leadership of Holofernes to steady them, with the dread of his fearful end hard upon them, and with sudden death striking them on all sides, the soldiers of the Assyrian army became but as sheep running about to be slaughtered. And then the dreadful cry of the stricken field went up: "All is lost!"

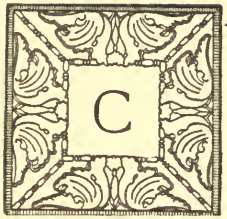
In a moment the army was transformed into a wild-eyed, fleeting mob of terror-stricken men, who ran killing those ahead that happened to be in the way.

And the Hebrews, many following, died from exhaustion.

At the top of the path which led up the little hill, a bloody, tired man and a loving woman, side by side, knelt in thankful prayer watching for the day. It came slowly, fearful of what it must reveal. First the hills loomed up, huge, indistinct masses

in the gloom, and on their tops the trees stood out grim, black silhouettes against the fire-line of approaching dawn. The chilly moon, pale from watching, crept sleepily to rest beneath a warm blanket of fleecy clouds. The earliest birds were piping the sentinel stars off guard. Far in the distance a great flock of geese gave warning that something unusual had occurred. Nearer were the cattle, noisily disconsolate at the smell of blood. And then, with sudden blazing glare, the sun leaped over the hills on the east to find that, during his absence in the night, the fertile plain in which he took a pride had broken out with a horrible eruption of dead men.

XXI



ARRYING in their hearts the chastening memories of the bitter past, each now bearing in his or her face the marks of present gladness, from the homes of the rich and the hovels of the poor, from all the highways and byways of the city, the men and women of Bethulia came forth to welcome Judith. With lutes and cymbals, with harps and taborets, with songs of joy and gladness, they awaited her approach.

It was the seventh day after the battle, but still, in obedience to the desire of Ozias, its deliverer had remained on the heights, but without the city. He wanted to put things in proper repair and remove all traces of the siege before her formal welcome. It had been a busy time. The dead bodies still lay by thousands in the plain below,

but up above, Bethulia, arrayed in the garments of her gladness, let no mark of grief or suffering appear. Here and there a few sad eyes and pinched faces told of siege-bereavements and past trials, but for the most part the people had happy hearts to back their smiling faces.

The story of the battle and the triumph had been told and told until all were tired of the details. How the guard of Judith did not return for five days, so far in pursuit it went; how Holofernes died, and Nin-Gul killed herself, and the wonderful adventures of Achior and Judith on the hill-top—all were old tales.

And this was the time of the triumph, and the people were ready waiting to do honor to their deliverer.

Drawn up about the public square and on the streets leading into it, the fighting-men, with Enan at the head, stood steady as became victorious soldiers. Before them were those with musical instruments, the sweet singers, and the women waiting with flowers to throw. And in the very centre of the square, beside the splashing, spluttering

fountain, stood Ozias, gentle, beaming Ozias, with unctuous Chabris and smiling Charmis close behind.

Now from without the walls sounded the blare of a trumpet. The great gate flew open. Ozias and the two other ancients hastened that way. The people — restless, eager, impatient—waited.

Then, along the narrow way that led from the gate there came the tramp, tramp, tramp of marching feet. Joseph, his eyes held strictly front, his body stiffly erect, appeared leading the guard of Judith. Their clothing gay, their weapons bright, but their armor bent and battered, the soldiers looked what they had been, the point of the Bethulian death-wedge.

With misty eyes of proudest love a young mother watched the father of her child, who had paid his debt to Judith so well.

The guard marched about the square and halted, facing the entrance street. There was a moment of stillness.

At sudden command, the sword of every soldier in the place flashed bare. Now the blades clashed wildly against the shields,

and then with one voice the people cried, "Long live Judith, savior of her people, deliverer of Bethulia!"

Arrayed all in pure white, her hair streaming about her, a halo of glowing gold; her rapt face turned upward in thankful exaltation, she entered the square, escorted by Achior and the ancients, while close behind pressed faithful little Sarah sharing her mistress's triumph.

Then in the frenzy of joyous delight the soldiers clashed their swords and shouted their loudest. The sweet singers and those with musical instruments strove vainly to be heard, while the women rained flowers thick before her feet.

And Judith walking there felt her dreams and visions in the mist come true, for were there not paths of thick-strewn flowers, and did she not hear the blare of trumpets, the music, the sweet singing, and her own name proclaimed on high, "Long live Judith, savior of her people!"

And thus they brought her unto her own house.

She passed in with Achior, and together,

in sight of all, they stood upon the roof. He looked down on her smiling.

"All is well," he said.

She looked at him, her eyes deep with the joy of her reception, soft, shining with love for the man.

"Yea," she murmured; "I stand upon the roof of mine own house. I see the fountain playing in the square, but best of all I see thee standing thus, close beside me."

And again the people gathered below cried loud: "Long live Judith, highest among women, savior of Bethulia!"

THE END

University of California
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1388
Return this material to the library
from which it was borrowed.

REC'D LD-URL
OCT 18 19
JUN 14 19

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 917 272 7